



# **NUCLEAR TERRORISM**

**Osama bin Laden, Suitcase Bombs,  
and Nuclear Blackmail**

**Patrik Nylund, MA**



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## **PREFACE**

This article examines Al Qaeda and the threat of nuclear terrorism, a subject matter I researched two years ago for my political science graduate thesis on nuclear threats against US national security in the post-Cold War era.

I wish to stress one point from the outset: this article builds on material published in the public domain, such as newspapers, journals, and books. That means that my knowledge of the possible existence of terrorist nuclear capabilities does not exceed that beyond the public knowledge. In other words, I don't know if Al Qaeda has nuclear capabilities, only that there is enough information available for taking such a possibility seriously.

While the substance of this article is similar to that of my master's thesis, the content is not in several important ways. I have removed all academic discussions and put the article in the context of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US. This article is not an scholarly exercise composed for an academic audience, but an examination written for a lay-audience of the potential American national security predicament to which the plausibility of nuclear terrorism gives rise.

The article describes the events of September 11 and their aftermath,

identifies the underlying causes of the terrorist attacks on the US, and investigates the possibility that the Al Qaeda terrorist network has, in fact, obtained nuclear capabilities. While it may not be positively determined whether Al Qaeda has any nuclear devices, sufficient evidence exists to indicate that we must take a terrorist nuclear threat seriously. The article finally details how this threat gives rise to a national security predicament by potentially limiting US responses to two equally unappealing options: (1) Al Qaeda triggers a nuclear explosion in one or more American population centers; (2) Al Qaeda practices nuclear blackmail, forcing the American government to change its foreign policy in order to save American cities and citizens.

These are terrible scenarios, but because there is enough evidence to suggest that Al Qaeda has attempted to obtain nuclear devices, might have succeeded, and seems both willing and able to detonate them, it is imperative to explore the policy options the American government has at its disposal. The concluding section of this article illustrates how nuclear terrorism gives rise to a new kind of vulnerability, completely unprecedented in scope. However, this vulnerability should not be confused with helplessness or give rise to defeatism, because the US is far from helpless in meeting the

threat of nuclear terrorism. But we are vulnerable in a way that is unparalleled. We need to be aware of this monumental national security predicament, to understand that there might not be a silver bullet for resolving it, and to do everything in our power to avoid it before it becomes a confirmed reality. If there is one thing we have learned from the September 11 attacks and the subsequent anthrax scare, it is that we can no longer afford to dismiss potential worst-case scenarios as farfetched fantasies.

After the recent fall of Kabul and the discovery of an Al Qaeda compound with nuclear weapon related material was made, US Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge said that, "we have to be prepared for all eventualities, including a nuclear threat." Mr. Ridge's warning is right on the money. What I would add to it is that only by understanding the exact nature of the threat, and accepting its gravity and plausibility, may we begin looking for effective solutions. Until we find those solutions, the threat of terrorist nuclear blackmail could trap us in an extremely dangerous national security predicament. To fully appreciate the severity of that predicament, we must understand the causes and forces behind the September 11 terrorist attacks.

## **PROLOGUE: UNLEASHING THE UNHOLY WAR**

At exactly 8:45 am EST, American Airlines Flight 11 from Boston to Los Angeles crashed into the 110-story north tower of the World Trade Center, instantly killing the nearly 100 people onboard and scores of office workers who literally never knew what hit them.

As bad as that was, things were only going to get worse.

The problem was, nobody knew that yet. Not quite yet at least.

When a second Boeing 767, United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston to Los Angeles, crashed into the other World Trade Center

tower exactly 18 minutes later, there could be no doubt among eyewitnesses to the events: these were no accidents, but deliberate acts of terror. Before the day was over, all of the US, along with the rest of the world, would know that as well.

But shortly after 9:00 am EST, as hundreds of firefighters and police officers were heading towards and into the two burning office buildings, passing thousands of New Yorkers fleeing lower Manhattan for their lives, nobody knew how bad things were, or how much worse they were going to get.

President Bush received the news in Sarasota, Florida, at 9:05 am EST, from White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card. Before Air Force One moved the president to Barksdale Air Force base in Louisiana, he asserted that the attack was most likely a terrorist act and promised that "it wouldn't stand."

At approximately the same time, American Airlines Flight 77 from Washington, DC, to Los Angeles crashed into the Pentagon, the American military nerve center on the outskirts of the nation's capital. Later, based in part on the flight pattern of the hijacked plane, investigators would conclude that the White House had likely been the original target. It had been saved only because heavy vegetation surrounding 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue made the White House difficult for the hijackers to locate from the air.

The government was now starting to act quickly. The Federal Air and Aviation Administration immediately grounded all aircraft, ordering those airborne to land as soon as possible, wherever possible. Congress, the White House, and a number of other federal government buildings were evacuated.

As aircraft all across America began to land wherever there were available airports, President Bush issued a very specific and historically unprecedented order: the US Air Force was to shoot down hijacked passenger planes to prevent any more of them from becoming missiles against American targets.

One of those planes could have been United Airlines Flight 93 from Newark to San Francisco. It was brought down into a field in southern Pennsylvania at 10:10 am EST, not by hijackers or American fighter plane pilots, but by a group of brave passengers. Speaking with loved ones by phone, they had learned of the earlier attacks. Knowing they were going to die that day, the passengers had collectively determined to meet their Maker on their own terms, and with as few people as possible. Their bravery most likely saved the US Capitol.

Those were some of the heroes of September 11.

Among the others were hundreds of firefighters and police officers doing everything in their power to rescue as many people as possible from the burning World Trade Center inferno when the unthinkable happened: both towers collapsed.

In what seemed like an eternity to eyewitnesses, two 110-story skyscrapers, the pride of modern structural engineering and a symbol of American wealth and ingenuity, crumpled as if they had been made of paper.

The first building to collapse was the South Tower, which fell at 10:00 am EST. The North Tower followed 29 minutes later.

Pandemonium struck the US, and New York City in particular, as nobody knew for certain exactly what was going on.

How many hijacked aircraft were still in the air?

Had the State Department building at Foggy Bottom been hit as well? Initial rumors indicated that this was the case -- that a car bomb had exploded outside.

Soon, reports of the attacks were broadcast live to every home in the US and throughout the world. Most Americans reacted with disbelief, shocked that fortress America had been successfully attacked.

But not everyone reacted with shock and disbelief. In the Middle East, in places such as Jerusalem and Lebanon, Arabs celebrated this great tragedy bestowed upon the US by dancing joyfully in the streets.

Around 1:00 pm EST, President Bush promised in a videotaped message to the American people that the US government would "hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," deeds that caused the deaths of thousands of people, most of whom simply turned to dust, incinerated by heat, vanishing into the burning pile of rubble and ashes where the Twin Towers once stood.

At that time, nobody knew with certainty who was responsible for the terrorist attacks. It wasn't long, though, before a suspect emerged: Osama bin Laden, leader of the Muslim fundamentalist terrorist organization Al Qaeda, who was hiding in Afghanistan courtesy of the Taliban, one of the cruelest, most primitive, and brutal regimes in the world.

Unholy war had been unleashed upon the US.

In the days following the September 11 attacks, as the American people went through shock, disbelief, grief, and finally anger, US public officials went to work securing the nation. At all levels of government, security was made priority number one. The nation's air traffic was shut down for several days as airline security was reviewed and steps taken to eliminate, or at least reduce, security weaknesses. Fighter planes patrolled the air continuously, ready to shoot down another hijacked passenger plane threatening an American city. Warships guarded the eastern and western seaboard. The Federal Air and Aviation Administration revived the US Sky Marshals

program with the goal of reinstating armed law enforcement personnel on selected flights. And scores of Arabs were hauled away and questioned by the Federal Government in a giant dragnet to catch the perpetrators behind the worst terrorist attacks in US history.

However, the men allegedly involved most directly in the attacks were not targeted by that dragnet, having died that day along with thousands of their victims. There would be no earthly justice for the hijackers of AA Flight 11, Mohammed Atta, Wail Alshehri, Waleed Alshehri, Abdulaziz Alomari, and Satam Suqami; UA Flight 175, Marwan Al-Shehhi, Fayez Ahmed, Ahmed Alghamdi, Hamza Alghamdi, and Mohamed Alshehri; AA Flight 77, Hani Hanjour, Khalid Al-Midhair, Majed Moqed, Nawaq Alhamzi, and Salem Alhamzi; and UA Flight 93, Ziad Jarrahi, Saeed Alghamdi, Ahmed Alhaznawi, and Ahmed Alnami.

Even in death, however, the 19 men provided important clues by the trail of evidence they left behind. Perhaps the most frightening fact to emerge from the search was that nobody had been more helpful in assisting them than the US, however unwittingly, by providing the training they needed to become suicide pilots. Our hospitality, expertise, and ingenuity had been used against us in the worst possible way.

Investigators soon established that the attacks had been planned and executed with the involvement of numerous people on several continents. The idea itself appears to have been conceived in Hamburg, Germany at least a year prior. Additionally, reports from Czech officials that the alleged ringleader, Mohammed Atta, had met with an Iraqi intelligence agent, Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir Al-Ani, during a trip to the Czech Republic in the spring

of 2001 created some suspicion as to the possible involvement of Iraq. (Mr. Al-Ani was expelled from the Czech Republic on April 22 due to conduct his European host found incompatible with his diplomatic status. When the Iraqi intelligence officer left the Czech capital of Prague, the hub of Iraqi intelligence in Europe allegedly lost one of its key operators.)

Iraq itself would later deny any connection to the September 11 attacks. The US government said it had no evidence of Iraqi involvement.

While the chain of events leading up to September 11 must be carefully established, the exact details of the lives of the 19 hijackers are not as significant as larger international movements -- trends that ultimately turned them into willing human bombs. To put it another way, just as examining the life of a single Nazi would not paint the complete picture of Nazism as an ideology and threat to humanity, examining the lives of these men would be of limited use in understanding Muslim fundamentalist terrorism. What may be said about them, though, is that they were not the typical suicide bombers: they did not come from impoverished backgrounds with little hope for the future, but rather, tended to be well educated, some of them at Western universities. Almost all of them were Saudi citizens.

Nor were they very good Muslims, as evidenced by many contradictory acts they undertook. According to Muslim scholars, to kill innocent people in an act of mass-murder is not how a Muslim becomes a martyr. In Islam, the martyr does not seek death the way the 19 hijackers did. Neither is it compatible with Islam to visit Las Vegas strip clubs and pay \$20 for a private dance. (In addition to his interest in the sins offered at the Olympic Garden Topless Cabaret,

one of the hijackers was "a bad tipper," according to a stripper who remembered the men visiting the club.) The manager at a motel where some of the hijackers stayed remembered them covering a picture in their room because they felt the woman in the illustration showed too much skin for their sensitive Muslim taste. Still, the hijackers spent a considerable amount of time on their balcony admiring bikini-clad American women at the motel swimming pool.

The only thing that might have been as great as the terrorists' cowardice was their hypocrisy.

In the weeks following the attacks, events of great importance took place in the US and around the world.

For the first time ever, NATO announced that a member state had been attacked. This meant that all member states were obliged to come to its aid in accordance with the NATO charter. The Taliban regime refused to hand over bin Laden and other key Al Qaeda figures. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld traveled around the world to drum up support for American military action against Al Qaeda and its host nation, Afghanistan. During all of this, the Taliban officially declared a *Jihad* (holy war) on the US.

In early October, anthrax spores started turning up in newsrooms around the nation, first in Florida, at the American Media building, taking the life of one man, then in New York City at NBC Nightly News, and eventually in the political heart of the nation's capital, Congress. Within a few weeks, the death toll was up to three, including two postal workers who came in contact with anthrax spores at work. As the month came to a close, almost 40 people had tested positive for anthrax

exposure. Of those, 15 had developed the disease.

As health officials had their first encounters in the war on the microscopic enemy, President Bush made the decision to attack Afghanistan. That October 2 decision followed to the letter what had become known as the "Bush Doctrine," a promise that nations harboring terrorists would have to choose between surrendering them to justice or sharing in their fate. In this case, that nation was Afghanistan. This should have come as no surprise to the Taliban regime: it had been warned by the Clinton administration as early as February 1999 that, from that point on, the US government would hold the Taliban responsible for any terrorist attacks committed by Al Qaeda.

On October 5, in the White House Situation Room, the President received assurance from top national security advisors that the military was ready to strike. The next day Mr. Bush met one last time with the National Security Council. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld informed the President that the US had received the necessary support of states bordering Afghanistan. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, answered affirmatively the President's question, "Dick, is Tommy Franks ready to go?" The Central Command General Thomas Franks, in charge of military operations in Central Asia, was. Mr. Bush gave his final go-ahead.

Operation Enduring Freedom's military phase began Sunday, October 7, 8:57 pm local time, when some 40 American and British planes swept over the skies of Afghanistan. Their goal: to destroy Taliban military targets and Al Qaeda camps. The attack took place in three main waves on the first day. Most of the munitions used were precision weapons, including Joint Direct Attack

Munition satellite-guided bombs with a range of up to 15 miles. American and British warships launched about 50 Tomahawk cruise long-range missiles, capable of reaching their targets with the help of the Global Positioning System and digital terrain matching.

The targets were primarily Afghani air defenses, including surface-to-air missiles set up to protect the capital Kabul, civilian and military airports and airfields, and locations around the city of Kandahar, an Al Qaeda stronghold as well as the Taliban regime's spiritual headquarters.

But more than bombs fell from the skies on the very first day of the war in Afghanistan. In an effort to win the hearts and minds of Muslims everywhere, in particular those of the Afghani people, the US dropped humanitarian aid, hoping Afghans would know that the war was not against them but against the regime that in effect held them hostage. That first day of the war, over 37,500 aid packages were dropped from C-17 transport jets. These packages contained food specifically prepared for Muslims: no animal products in general, no pork in particular, and no alcohol or alcohol-based products. In addition there were leaflets and windup radios, the latter an absolute necessity for a propaganda war in which a majority of those to be won over couldn't read, had no access to TV, and risked severe punishment by the Taliban if they were caught with one.

Bin Laden and Al Qaeda reacted quickly -- so quickly it was evident that the American attack had been anticipated and well prepared for. (Some suggested that Al Qaeda had hoped for military actions against it and Afghanistan, thinking the US response would signal the beginning of an all-out war between the West and the Muslim

world). The videotape sent to independent Arab news station Al Jazeera before dawn the next day had been taped during daylight, an obvious sign that it had been prepared prior to the attack on Afghanistan.

The videotape began with one of bin Laden's associates, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, blaming the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US.

"What happened in the US is a natural reaction to the ignorant policy of the US. If it continues with this policy, the sons of Islam will not stop their struggle. The American people have to know that what is happening to them now is the result of their support of this policy. The war against Afghanistan is a war on Islam."

So far, there was little new as far as the Al Qaeda ideology and thinking were concerned.

Then it was bin Laden's turn to speak. Dressed in battle fatigues, his head covered with a traditional headdress, and an AK-47 assault rifle beside him, bin Laden tossed out one familiar assertion after another.

The taped statement, however, did offer one significant piece of evidence in the search for those responsible for the September 11 attacks. For the first time, bin Laden seemed to hint at Al Qaeda involvement, although he ultimately just expressed satisfaction that the attacks had taken place. He concluded his statement with a very specific threat to the American people.

"Neither America, or the people who live in it, will dream of security before we live it in Palestine, and not before all the infidel armies leave the land of the Prophet Mohammed."

The videotape confirmed what national security analysts had known for a long time: Al Qaeda wanted the US to end its military and political presence in the Muslim world and its support for

the state of Israel. Towards that end, Al Qaeda would apply the War Paradigm, an ongoing terror war against the US aimed at changing the American pay-off matrix.

Upon learning of the attack, Muslims in Pakistan immediately took to the streets. American flags were burned along with effigies of President Bush. At least one Pakistani was killed that day during anti-American demonstrations. In a few weeks, Pakistani Muslims would be heading towards Afghanistan to join the Taliban in the *Jihad* against the US. On their way they would pass scores of Afghan refugees streaming into Pakistani refugee camps along the border.

The second day of strikes began around 9:00 pm local time. When they were over, the US had destroyed more Afghani airfields, early radar warning sites, surface-to-air missile launchers, missile storage locations, and enemy tanks and troops. Within days of the first attack, the US completely controlled the Afghani skies. With American air superiority absolute, the US could fly over the country at will.

That would not, however, be enough to win the war. At some point, the Taliban would have to be defeated on the ground, either by American forces, or, ideally, by America's newest best friend in the region, the Northern Alliance, which had been fighting Taliban rule of Afghanistan for the past five years.

Although the Taliban controlled most of the ground in Afghanistan, it soon became clear that well-trained American special forces had the ability to come and go as they saw fit, even penetrating deep into Taliban strongholds. This was exactly what 100 Army Rangers and other US special forces did on Saturday October 20, leaving behind souvenirs for the Taliban regime in one of the structures they searched: pictures of three New York City firefighters raising the American flag over the rubble at what had become known as "Ground Zero."

While the war on terrorism in Afghanistan was going well so far, on the home front, things were quite different. Bio-terrorism had finally become the reality that national security analysts had warned about for years. Letters with anthrax had appeared at media offices on the East Coast and in the US Congress. Although the number of people infected was small, and that of actual deaths smaller yet, envelopes with anthrax were serving their intended purpose: to spread fear among the American public and, if need be, kill scores of innocent civilians.

As Americans had borne witness to the mass-murders Al Qaeda terrorists were both willing and able to unleash upon the US, one question appeared in the media and public discourse from time to time: did Al Qaeda have nuclear weapons?

Some reports indicated that they did. But was that really possible? Or was that just another unsubstantiated rumor, like the urban legend about an American woman with an Afghani boyfriend who abandoned her without explanation a few days before the September 11 attacks, leaving behind a letter begging her not to fly on that day and not to visit any malls on Halloween? Or the report that one man had survived the collapse of the towers by "sliding" down the outside of the building as it collapsed, leaving the rubble with only a few bruises? And then there was the mother of all urban legends that followed the September 11 attacks: the story of the face of the devil appearing in the smoke of the burning World Trade Center. Although these stories were believed by some, it was evident to most that they were nothing more than urban legends.

Could the reports that Al Qaeda might have nuclear weapons be a legend of the same sort?

Unfortunately, as the following sections will illustrate, there is ample evidence to suggest that Al Qaeda may very well have nuclear capabilities and the motivation to use them. This leaves us with one very important question.

As bad as things have been, and continue to be, as the US wages war half a world away and Americans face the threat of anthrax at home, ***could the worst be yet to come?***

## PART ONE: WHY DO THEY HATE US?

*Why do they hate us?*

This was the question raised by a majority of Americans after September 11. President Bush attempted to answer it in his speech to the American people

and US Congress the week after the attacks.

"They hate our freedoms," Mr. Bush asserted, as he promised that the nation wouldn't tire, wouldn't falter, and wouldn't fail in

its pursuit of security at home and justice for the terrorists.

While Mr. Bush's statement wasn't untrue in the sense that Al Qaeda and its supporters do not value or care for the freedoms

Americans hold dear, a full answer requires a more in-depth examination and analysis. This section will provide that examination and analysis. But to truly understand the forces behind these tragic terrorist events, and the real risk of more attacks, the question must be re-framed:

*Why do they want to create mass destruction in the US and kill scores of innocent Americans?*

The answer in a nutshell is this: (1) the last few decades have witnessed an Islamic Resurgence; (2) this Islamic Resurgence has shifted the self-identification of many people to one built primarily on a religious Muslim identity; (3) this emerging identity has in turn created new interest formations among those swept up in the Islamic Resurgence; (4) part of those interest formations is the purification of the Islamic nation through the expulsion of non-Muslim influences, such as American troops on Islamic soil and the existence of a Jewish state in Palestine; (5) creating mass destruction in the US is merely a strategy toward that end, and that strategy is the War Paradigm. Specifically, the War Paradigm is the leveraging of terrorism and massive destruction in order to force policy decisions in the West that abandon our current interests in the Middle East.

### **The Catalyst: The Islamic Resurgence**

From the moment the US government began taking action against those directly and indirectly responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks, American policymakers have repeatedly uttered statements that form a virtual mantra:

'We're not at war with Islam. We're at war with those who commit atrocious crimes in the name of Islam. We know Islam is a good, peaceful religion, and that the vast majority of Muslims

everywhere are good, decent people, whose religion has been tainted by evil-doers.'

This is absolutely true. We are not at war with Islam. But segments of those who represent Islam by adhering to its beliefs and principals are at war with us for the very reason that we do not adhere to these beliefs. Policymakers downplay this idea for political reasons, since admitting there is a real religious component involved could weaken already fragile international coalitions and create a political backlash in the Muslim world. Worse yet, this could help to mobilize fundamentalist, anti-Western forces, leading to the overthrow of existing governments and/or creating regional instabilities with global ramifications. Against this background, it is understandable that policy makers would minimize the religious context of the current threat. We must acknowledge their wisdom in doing so and their diplomatic skills in doing it well.

To claim that there is a very real and substantial religious element to the September 11 events may not be politically correct, but to deny its existence would be a great disservice to ourselves. Only by understanding the religious underpinnings of the mechanisms leading up to these tragic events can we fully understand why they took place. This requires a closer look at the Islamic Resurgence.

Much of what has been reported since September 11 supports what national security analysts have been saying for years: Al Qaeda is on a worldwide campaign against the US because the American military presence in Saudi Arabia and support of Israel are perceived as threats to Islam. Bin Laden himself wrapped up these sentiments quite eloquently in a 1998 interview: "Our holy land is occupied by Israeli and American

forces. We have the right to defend ourselves and to liberate our holy land."

Their campaign has been characterized by mass-scale terrorist attacks, among them the synchronized bombings of two American embassies in Africa in August of 1998, killing over 200 people and wounding about 5,000; the Riyadh and Khobar blasts in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996, killing 24 Americans; and the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, killing 17 US sailors. There are also indications that bin Laden was connected to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, masterminded by Ramzi Yousef, who both Pakistani and US government officials believe spent time in Al Qaeda training camps in 1992. This seems to be a credible proposition, considering that the final words of Yousef in US court were virtually identical to those bin Laden had uttered in numerous interviews with Western journalists. For example, both Yousef and bin Laden claimed that the US invented terrorism, but that terrorism was legitimate when used against the US and Israel.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright concluded while still in office that the US was at war with religious terrorism. Her predecessor, Warren Christopher, said the American government believed that one of the most important security challenges facing the US in the post-Cold War era was terrorism in the name of religion and ethnic identity.

Although a number of other national security experts had long expressed similar sentiments, a great many people dismissed these warnings as farfetched Hollywood screenwriter scenarios, claiming that the warnings said more about the people who uttered them than about the world in which we live. Only a few years

after the many warnings by national security experts, it is painfully clear that the nightmare scenarios they cautioned of have become a horrible reality. What many thought of as paranoia has proven to be truth.

After all, some people were really out to get us. And they still are.

The underlying reason is a widespread popular movement known as the Islamic Resurgence, which has swept the Muslim world in the last few decades. Its birth may be traced back to some time shortly after the 1967 Six Day War, when the Arab world was dealt yet another humiliating blow by the state of Israel: being defeated by a much smaller enemy and losing Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. Disillusioned with Western ideologies such as nationalism, democracy, social equality, and modernity in general, many Muslims started looking inwards for ideologies that could deliver what they felt Western ideologies could not.

The perceived failures of Western ideologies gave rise to an emerging identity based on religion -- a home grown identity, as opposed to those rooted in nationalism or political ideology. Further strengthening the Islamic Resurgence was the belief on the part of many Muslims that the misfortunes and humiliations visited upon the Muslim world since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War were punishments from God because Muslims had strayed by believing in foreign, false prophets.

If believing in false prophets was the ill, the Islamic Resurgence was the cure, ridding Islamic nations of secular regimes in Muslim countries. Two key components of the cure were ending the American military, political, and economic support of

these regimes, and eliminating the existence of a Jewish state in Palestine.

### **The Actors: The Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden**

The Islamic Resurgence is an underlying cause of recent developments and the rise of some infamous players on the world affairs arena. In the context of this article, it all started with the Soviet war in Afghanistan during the 1980s, a war that drew resistance fighters from all over the Muslim world. It continued with the Taliban seizure of power in 1996, its implementation of a strict interpretation of Islamic law in Afghanistan, and its provision of refuge and training ground in Afghanistan to the Al Qaeda terrorist network.

A closer look at the history of Afghanistan and the Taliban regime's rise to power will clarify these events.

Afghanistan's past represents one of the oldest histories in the world. Despite the cold, dry, and often hostile terrain, pre-historic life is thought to date back some 50,000 years. The history of Afghanistan as a territorial unit resembling that of today can be traced back to the middle of the 1700s. In the following century, Afghanistan became a playground for imperial ambitions between Great Britain and Russia, in what became known as the "Great Game." Towards the end of the 1800s, Afghanistan became a buffer zone between the two empires. Great Britain eventually seized control over Afghani foreign affairs. This led to a war between Great Britain and Afghanistan in 1919, ending with a peace treaty recognizing the independence of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan became a monarchy in 1926. This monarchy lasted until 1973 when the king, Muhammad Zahir Shah, was overthrown during a trip to Italy

and Afghanistan was declared a republic. The new, self-declared President, incidentally the former king's cousin, Muhammad Daud, ruled until 1978, when he was removed from power by a leftist military coup following a backlash from Daud's crackdown on the political left.

The leftist policies of the new government did not please Islamic traditionalists and ethnic leaders. An armed revolt began that same year.

By the summer of 1979, Islamist rebels controlled much of the Afghani countryside. As the leftist government increasingly weakened, the Soviets grew increasingly concerned, finally launching an all-out invasion on Christmas Day in 1979. The Soviet Red Army soon took control of important urban centers and helped to install a president friendly to Soviet interests.

Despite attempts by the new Afghani government to implement reforms compatible with Muslim beliefs and Afghani traditions, it remained unpopular and the rebellion intensified. Although many people around the world sympathized with the Afghani rebels, few believed they would ever succeed in their fight against the Soviet occupational Red Army.

As the war continued, it became evident that the world had miscalculated the determination and fury of the Afghani fighters, or *Mujahedin* as they were collectively known, "warriors in the way of God." In 1986, they received much-needed military assistance from the US in the form of Stinger missiles and training, used with great efficiency to shoot down hundreds of Soviet armored helicopters.

The Afghani war was both politically and economically costly for the Soviets. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, his key priorities were to implement domestic reforms and

to end the war in Afghanistan. In May of 1988, the major players in the Afghan war -- Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, the US, and Pakistan -- agreed to initiate measures designed to end foreign intervention in that country.

When the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan in February 1989, leaving behind 15,000 dead Red Army comrades, their withdrawal was only one of many remarkable international events of that year. In the summer, the Chinese Communist regime cracked down on student demonstrators demanding political reforms in China, killing and wounding thousands in the process. A few months later, the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe began to collapse. Before the end of the year, the Berlin Wall had fallen and Eastern Europe had rejected Communism without Soviet intervention like that in Hungary in 1956 or Prague in 1968.

Whether the Cold War ended in 1989 or two years later when the Soviet Union ceased to exist altogether, the players on the Cold War proxy battlefield that was Afghanistan continued their war. The problem was, nobody noticed, or perhaps nobody cared. In either case, the end result was the same: Afghanistan was more or less left to its own devices.

The Afghan Communist regime installed by the Soviets in 1979 finally collapsed in 1992. A new government came to power. The civil war continued.

In 1994, the Taliban emerged from a group of rebel soldiers. If the name were taken literally, this group was composed of religious students. ("Taliban" is the plural form of the Arabic word for religious student). As legend has it, the Taliban coalesced after a local leader in Kandahar pleaded with the future leader of the group, Mohammed Omar, to help him rescue a bride who had been kidnapped and raped by a local

warlord's militia group. Saving the bride was exactly what Omar and his associates did. This was the beginning of their rise as a force to be reckoned with. Two years later, the Taliban seized Kabul. They captured the Soviet-backed Communist president Najibullah and his brother the security chief, beat and shot them, and finally hung them from a pylon at Ariana Square.

Although the Taliban had originally received some popular support due to its success in bringing an end to the widespread lawlessness around Afghanistan, it became evident only a few days later that it had more on its agenda than creating law and order.

The Taliban was going to reconfigure Afghan society in accordance with its own favored religious preferences by implementing a strict version of Islamic law. Toward this end, the Taliban created a government entity named "Ministry for Ordering What Is Right and Forbidding What Is Wrong." Within days of the capture of Kabul, women were beaten in public places for violating Taliban religious beliefs; perceived vices such as music, kite-flying, TV-watching, and chess were outlawed; and men were ordered to let their beards grow, all in accordance with the Taliban interpretation of the *Sharia*, Islamic law.

The official government was forced to flee the capital. Since then, the Taliban regime, under the leadership of Mohammed Omar, has controlled most of Afghanistan. What it has not controlled has been under the hold of the Taliban opposition known as the Northern Alliance. Prior to September 11, only a handful of countries recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Since its take-over in 1996, the Taliban has created more laws aimed at realizing its perception of

a perfect Islamic society. Some of those laws, enforced by the "vice and virtue police," have made acts such as adultery and drug dealing punishable by death. (The latter crime might be perceived as somewhat surprising, or perhaps hypocritical, considering that the Taliban has profited considerably from opium poppy cultivation in the areas it controls). Public executions are regularly carried out at packed soccer stadiums in Kabul. At the end of the day, the Taliban human rights record is one of the worst in the world.

Afghani women have been the predominant victims under the Taliban regime. They are no longer permitted to work outside the home, are not allowed to receive an education, and are forbidden to be in public spaces without the head-to-toe dress known as the *Burka* and the company of a male relative. Women are assaulted and beaten in public by Taliban police if caught violating any of the regime's rules.

Cultural artifacts and a rich human heritage have also been among the victims of the Taliban reign. In the beginning of 2001, the Taliban ordered the destruction of non-Muslim religious artifacts, claiming that they were sacrilegious. Part of this campaign was the planned destruction of an ancient Buddha statue carved directly out of mountain rock. Despite international condemnation and pleas, the Taliban destroyed the Buddha statue.

Considering the brutality of the Taliban regime and its own very special interpretation of Islam (so extreme that even fundamentalist Iran finds it excessive), there may be little surprise that it has provided sanctuary to the Al Qaeda terrorist network, led by Osama bin Laden, a Saudi millionaire and devoted Muslim who has declared war on the US.

Originally stationed in Sudan, bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network were forced to move their operations to Afghanistan in 1996, arriving in that country around the same time as the Taliban rose to power. In 1998, bin Laden supplemented his declared war on the US with an Islamic religious edict. By so doing, bin Laden supported his calls for violence with theological justification. Bin Laden is believed to be able to call on the services of some 4,000-5,000 terrorists spread around the world. In an interview in May of 1998, bin Laden explained the reasons he had made the US a terrorist target.

"The call to wage war against America was made because America has spear-headed the crusade against the Islamic nation, sending tens of thousands of its troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques [in Saudi Arabia] over and above its meddling in its affairs and its politics, and its support of the oppressive, corrupt and tyrannical regime that is in control."

The Al Qaeda war against America would be fought through a strategy known as the War Paradigm.

### **The Strategy: The War Paradigm**

While the Afghani War in the 1980s might have been seen as a Cold War battlefield by the West, the many Arab Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East who traveled to Afghanistan to join the battle against the Soviet Red Army were fighting a completely different war: a *Jihad* against "Crusaders" and "Zionists." In retrospect, it is clear that one of the last proxy battlegrounds of the Cold War was also one of the first confrontations in the Muslim fundamentalists' war on the West in the name of Islam. Bin Laden himself was part of the effort to expulse the occupational Soviet forces from Muslim territory. Convinced that he and his fellow rebels had succeeded in that endeavor when the Soviets left in 1989, he turned his attention to the other, soon-to-be only, remaining superpower, the former ally against the Soviet "Crusaders."

Bin Laden decided that the time to defeat the US had come.

The way to defeat the US was going to be through the War Paradigm (also called asymmetric warfare). It makes no specific demands on the US, but aims to cause as much destruction as possible in order to make it too costly for the American government to have a presence in the Muslim world. Al Qaeda believes that, ultimately, continuous, excessive violence against American targets will compel the US government to remove its physical and political presence from the Muslim world and end its support of Israel. Former US Secretary of Defense William Cohen has drawn a similar conclusion. He warned in 1997 that violent Islamic extremists are convinced that they can only fight the superior US with success by employing Weapons of Mass Destruction against US troops and civilians.

Enter biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons.

## **PART TWO: IS THERE A NUCLEAR THREAT?**

*Is there a nuclear threat against the US?*

As the previous section demonstrates, Al Qaeda wants to inflict damage upon the US because it believes that continuous, excessive force against American targets might, in the long run, realize the terrorist organization's political goals.

But nuclear terrorism?

Is that possible?

Is it likely?

Or is it perhaps a part of the psychological warfare that the threat of terror represents?

If it is the latter, this article might do a great disservice to the American public by suggesting that things could get even worse: that

the events of September 11 and the subsequent biological warfare were just precursors to even more devastating terror Al Qaeda could unleash on US cities and the American public. This prospect gives good cause for advising reader discretion.

Bin Laden has not ruled out the possibility of using nuclear weapons against American targets. In a January 1998 interview, he asserted:

"Acquiring weapons for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty. If I have indeed acquired these [atomic] weapons, then I thank God for enabling me to do so. And if I seek to acquire these weapons, I am carrying out a duty.

It would be a sin for Muslims not to try to possess the weapons that would prevent the infidels from inflicting harms on Muslims."

Almost four years later, a month into the US war in Afghanistan, bin Laden hinted to a Pakistani journalist during an interview that he might possess nuclear weapons. After the Taliban fled Kabul the following week, the search of an abandoned Al Qaeda compound revealed material related to nuclear capabilities.

Despite all this, is nuclear terrorism a credible, plausible threat? While national security experts can't agree on the answer, I will outline why it is reasonable to assume that the prospect of a

terrorist nuclear attack is not the kind of farfetched fiction we are used to from films such as 1997's "The Peacemaker," in which George Clooney and Nicole Kidman prevent a terrorist nuclear device from detonating in New York City. Rather, there is support for the claim that Al Qaeda might be able to acquire, deliver, and detonate a nuclear device. This section further illustrates that Al Qaeda may have overcome not only the technical difficulties involved, but also any strategic and moral barriers which would prevent them from carrying out a nuclear attack against American targets.

### Is It Technically Possible?

Whether or not Al Qaeda poses a nuclear threat to the US depends initially on it having the capabilities to do so.

There are several sources claiming that Al Qaeda has attempted to acquire nuclear capabilities. Some of these sources go as far as to suggest that terrorists within the bin Laden network have succeeded in their quest.

Before exploring these matters, let us take a brief look into the functioning of nuclear weapons, which, in this context, means fission bombs. Fission bombs are popularly called atomic bombs, the kind of nuclear weapon created by the Manhattan Project during World War II. These are different from fusion weapons, typically referred to as thermonuclear- or hydrogen bombs, which require a fission bomb as a detonator.

In order to pose a nuclear threat to the US, the state or non-state actor needs to have both an actual nuclear weapon and the means to deliver it. That nuclear weapon would most likely be a fission bomb.

A fission bomb works by fissioning, or splitting, one type of

atoms (elements) into new types of atoms, whose total mass is less than the original. The lost mass is converted into energy. If the fissionable atoms are packed closely enough to acquire a critical mass, a chain reaction occurs. The result is a nuclear explosion.

Two elements (fissionable material) can be used for making a fission weapon. One is uranium-235 (U-235) and the other is plutonium (Pu-239). Both must be manufactured. Of the two, plutonium is the most easily produced. Extraction of plutonium is done in a separation plant through low-grade uranium. While building a plutonium bomb is more difficult than building a uranium bomb, obtaining sufficient uranium is more difficult than getting enough plutonium, which is a nuclear power plant by-product.

Although uranium is a naturally occurring element, it is more difficult to acquire because extracting the fissionable U-235, a process known as "enriching the uranium," is cumbersome. After plutonium has been extracted from a nuclear power plant, it is taken to a plutonium reprocessing facility, at which point it may be used to produce a nuclear weapon.

After successfully producing a nuclear weapon (a warhead), the next step is acquiring the means to deliver it to its target. This can be accomplished several different ways: ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, bombers, and covert means. Ballistic missiles are launched along a trajectory and can be designed and programmed to travel across continents (inter-continental ballistic missiles). Some ballistic missiles can be launched from submarines. Nuclear warheads can also be delivered by cruise missiles, which function more like an airplane, with the ability to change course. Before the advent of missiles, strategic bombers (dropped from a plane) were the preferred delivery

vehicle. A nuclear weapon may also be brought to the target area by covert means, such as aboard a cargo ship.

A few words ought to be said about the difference between strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. The latter is basically a nuclear weapon with *relatively* small capabilities. Its intended purpose is use against enemy troops in the battlefield. This makes it a more conventional weapon in the sense that it has a military purpose, which a strategic nuclear weapon does not. A strategic nuclear weapon is intended to prevent the enemy from using its strategic nuclear weapons. A strategic nuclear device has zero military use because it can not realize the goals of military actions. Use of a strategic nuclear weapon represents a failure, because its purpose is not use but deterrence.

While designing a nuclear weapon that could serve as a credible threat has long required sophisticated technological expertise, access to fissionable material, and the means to deliver it, all of these obstacles have become less difficult to overcome since the end of the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, an international black market developed for terrorists with global reach and an appetite for the mass murder and destruction that nuclear capabilities offered. (A court document related to the arrest of one of the founding members of Al Qaeda, Mahmoud Salim, in September of 1998 concludes that Al Qaeda as early as 1992 attempted to acquire highly enriched uranium and other components necessary for the making of nuclear weapons.)

At this juncture, there are two possible scenarios by which Al Qaeda might have obtained nuclear capabilities.

First, Al Qaeda could have attempted to make its own nuclear devices. The constraints it would have faced are the acquisition of fissile material and the know-how. The former Soviet Union is a potential source of fissile material, as evident from the tremendous problems it has experienced since the end of the Cold War with nuclear related thefts and smuggling. Unfortunately, there is ample evidence to suggest that fissile materials have been stolen from the former Soviet Union and put out for sale on the international black market.

Having the fissile materials is not enough. Knowing how to use these materials is also necessary. However, today that knowledge is practically in the public domain. Add to this the fact that there are between 1,000 and 2,000 individuals in the former Soviet Union who have the needed expertise and could be tempted to sell it, given the poverty in which they live. These factors make the proposition of Al Qaeda building its own nuclear weapon not too farfetched. Several national security experts agree it is feasible that a terrorist organization with enough money could build a crude nuclear weapon.

What makes this possibility even more plausible is the fact that former Pakistani nuclear weapons specialist Sultan Bashir-ud-Din Mahmood, who has 34 years of experience building that nation's nuclear program, is allegedly a zealous Muslim and Taliban supporter. He has, in recent years, made trips to Afghanistan that might allegedly have involved supplying the Taliban with the wherewithal to build nuclear devices. Add to this Mahmood's position on the Taliban, which he calls the "upholders of a movement -- the movement of renaissance of Islam in the world. Simple proof of this is that is that all anti-Islamic

forces are united in opposition to them."

Mahmood is also the president of an organization named Ummah Tameer-e-Nau. Of concern to Western intelligence is the fact that Ummah, which stands for a larger Islamic community that does not recognize nation-state borders, has been involved in the construction of a complex of buildings outside of Kandahar, since destroyed by US bombs. The exact purpose and content of these buildings are unknown at this point.

Second, Al Qaeda could have bought tactical nuclear weapons. Numerous sources claim that Al Qaeda has attempted this and succeeded. There is disagreement, however, on the quantity. Russian intelligence estimates that Al Qaeda may have obtained a few, while Arab intelligence sources suggest that it may be more than twenty.

Perhaps the most frightening scenario is that Al Qaeda might have given the Chechen Mafia millions of dollars and considerable amounts of heroin in return for so-called nuclear suitcase bombs (the technical name is RA-115). Nuclear suitcase bombs are tactical nuclear weapons manufactured by the Soviet Union during the Cold War with an explosive charge of 1 KT (kiloton) of TNT. (For comparison, the *air burst* nuclear weapon yield of the bomb dropped over Hiroshima in 1945 was 12.5 KT. After it exploded some 1,000 feet in the air for maximum effect, it killed roughly 70,000 of the 200,000 residents in the blast and firestorm that followed. Thousands more died later from wounds and radiation poisoning.)

These tactical nuclear weapons are small enough to fit in a suitcase, hence the name. They can be activated in 20 to 30 minutes, although there appears to be some uncertainty among

experts as to whether or not the suitcase bombs are programmed with a coding system that requires signals from Moscow in order to be detonated.

According to the former Russian general Alexander Lebed, the whereabouts of 84 suitcase bombs out of an arsenal of 132 are unknown. Lebed reported this news to an American congressional delegation in the summer of 1997. While massive official denials followed Lebed's announcement, several credible persons supported his claim that the former Soviet Union had, as a matter of fact, produced these suitcase bombs. Dr. Alexei Yablokov, former Science Advisor to Boris Yeltsin, in his testimony before the Research And Development Subcommittee of the US House National Security Committee on October 2, 1997, asserted that Russian suitcase bombs existed and that some of them were unaccounted for. Eventually the Russian government, too, seemed to concede that suitcase bombs existed and that their security might have been imperfect.

The technical possibility of nuclear suitcase bombs is strengthened by the fact that in the 1960s the US built hundreds of similar mini-nuclear devices: the Special Atomic Demolition Munition, which weighed 80-100 lbs., had an explosive charge of roughly 1 KT of TNT, and was small enough to fit in a duffel bag.

Some of these Russian nuclear suitcase bombs were allegedly acquired by Al Qaeda in the fall of 1998. They are reported to have been transferred to a Taliban complex near Kandahar (remember the former Pakistani nuclear weapons specialist Sultan Bashir-ud-Din Mahmood, who had been involved in the construction of a complex of buildings outside of Kandahar?). Some of the missing nuclear suitcase bombs

may even have been in the US long before Al Qaeda became interested in nuclear weapons, having been hidden here during the Cold War. This is according to Stanislav Lunev, a former Soviet military intelligence Colonel, who revealed this information during a Congressional hearing in January 2000.

If Lunev spoke the truth, who in the former Soviet Union knows the whereabouts of the nuclear suitcase bombs hidden on American soil? And what evidence do we have that these individuals have not attempted and succeeded in selling some of them to Al Qaeda sleeper agents in the US? These sleeper agents might be awaiting orders from the Al Qaeda leadership to detonate one in the American city where they live, which could be Boston, Atlanta, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, or maybe Salt Lake City, proud host city of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games.

We may at this point conclude that there is ample evidence Al Qaeda has at a minimum attempted to obtain nuclear capabilities, and at a maximum succeeded. Still, this leaves one crucial technical problem that Al Qaeda would have to solve before nuclear weapons would pose a threat to the US: how would they be delivered to and detonated in the target area?

While the US has beefed up its national security since September 11, prior to these terrorist attacks the US had a large number of uncontrolled harbors that offered easy, illegal access to US territory. And although airport security is supposed to detect fissile materials, it is possible to shield them so that they would defeat radiation detectors. In other words, getting nuclear material or bombs into the US might not have been a very difficult task.

Once nuclear weapons are in the target area, they can be

detonated without great difficulty. That Al Qaeda could both get nuclear weapons into the US and detonate them is supported by several national security analysts.

#### **Would It be Counterproductive?**

During the Cold War, neither the US nor the Soviet Union wanted to launch strategic nuclear weapons because such a strike would only lead to a counter strike. The goal of strategic nuclear weapons was to ensure the physical survival of the state by preventing the opponent from launching a first strike. Nor did they want to confront each other in a conventional war, since it could potentially lead to the use of strategic nuclear weapons through an escalation of tensions.

Thus, having nuclear weapons served a purpose for the US during the Cold War, in that it provided high-risk, high-reward national security and international stability until international Communism collapsed. But would it serve a purpose for terrorists to have and/or detonate nuclear devices?

A conventional view on terrorism and nuclear capabilities argues that terrorists are not as interested in killing a lot of people as they are in having a lot of people watching. Further, mass-casualties do not tend to lend popular support to the terrorist political agenda. The War Paradigm dictates a new thinking as far as nuclear terrorism is concerned: *the possibility that nuclear weapons offer in terms of creating mass destruction and killing scores of civilians is, in fact, the goal.* In other words, while possessing nuclear weapons would have been counter-productive for groups such as the Irish Republican Army or the Basque separatist movement, for Al Qaeda, this is not the case.

Thus, we ought to be concerned that the terrorists within

bin Laden's network would not be prevented from using nuclear capabilities against the US because of strategic constraints. Their motivation is to create mass destruction, or at a minimum to offer a credible threat that they are able and willing to do so. For Al Qaeda, mass murder is a part of the strategy that is the War Paradigm: to make it too costly for the US to have a military presence and foreign policy in the Muslim world.

If Al Qaeda relies on the credible threat of excessive force as a means of reaching its political goals, what better tool of excessive force might there be than a nuclear device (or biological and chemical terrorism)?

Because at the end of the day, their goal is to change their opponent's pay-off matrix through excessive use of force, or a credible threat thereof.

In this case, the threat of a nuclear detonation would not be counter-productive in Al Qaeda's view. It is reasonable to assume that Al Qaeda might have drawn the conclusion that the US is a paper-tiger, based on its observations that the US withdrew from Beirut after 240 Marines were killed by a suicide bomber in 1983, and left Somalia after US servicemen were killed and dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. (In hindsight, if acts such as these sent the wrong message to terrorists, now may be the time to show them that this conclusion was wrong.)

#### **Is It Too Immoral to be Carried Out?**

*Might Al Qaeda be prevented from detonating a nuclear device for moral reasons?*

While virtually all Americans would agree that nuclear terrorism constitutes an immoral act, it is important to remember that the terrorists within the Al Qaeda network do not reason in the same

way. Any doubt into that proposition should be eradicated by the events of September 11. After all, what reasonable, moral person would fly a jet into an office building, killing himself and thousands of innocent people, if morality was a part of the equation?

Obviously nobody.

But make no mistake about it, Al Qaeda does not view its actions as immoral. Perhaps more importantly, the people carrying out these acts are not "crazy," if we define that as an inability to tell right from wrong due to mental illness. They might perhaps be labeled evil, and definitely classified as psychopaths and sociopaths, but to truly understand why the immoral aspect of a nuclear attack would not prevent Al Qaeda terrorists from carrying it out, we need to examine a few issues more closely.

These terrorists could pose a nuclear threat to the US because they have morally detached themselves from the consequences of their actions. This is evident from the many testimonies we have heard before and after September 11.

First of all, they have stripped Americans of their value as humans by branding them "infidels." As such, we are not only without value, but we also pose a threat to the pure and good religion of Islam. To Al Qaeda, an infidel tainting the Muslim world poses the same kind of threat that the so-called "sub-humans" did to the Nazis, who truly believed they were in a global struggle with

Jews, Slavs, etc., who wanted to destroy them. The Nazis did not perceive themselves as immoral, although from time to time they would admit that mass killings of so-called "sub-humans" was a dirty business. But it was a dirty business that had to be carried out, because it was the only way to preserve the pure self, to protect it from the evil other. In other words, the Nazi and Al Qaeda ideologies share the belief that there is a life and death struggle between what is good (the self) and what is evil (the other). The terrorists within the Al Qaeda network simply perceive Westerners as "infidels," and as such they are inferior to Muslims and a threat to the Muslim world. After all, we are commonly known as "the Great Satan." (Incidentally, Adolph Hitler also described Jews as the personification of the devil in *Mein Kampf*.) Thus, killing the inferior other is not only justified, it is even imperative, just as a doctor would try to kill a cancer threatening the life of his or her patient. To Al Qaeda, the American military and political presence and influence in the Islamic world represent a cancer on the Muslim nation that must be fought by any and all means necessary.

Second, Al Qaeda terrorists do not take responsibility for the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians that resulted from terrorist attacks, because in their minds, it is not their fault. Rather, they believe these acts were carried out by the grace of God, and were caused by American foreign policy, even when they themselves

hijacked the planes and flew them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In other words, Al Qaeda believes that the death of the victim is the victim's own fault, because he or she is an infidel who supports a government with policies Al Qaeda dislikes. The statement made by Sulaiman Abu Ghaith after the US attack on Afghanistan is a textbook example of how the terrorists deal with internal discomfort by displacement of responsibility:

"What happened in the US [on September 11] is a natural reaction to the ignorant policy of the US. The American people have to know that what is happening to them now is the result of their support of this policy."

The character of this statement is quite similar to that made by Hitler only seven months before he threw the world into yet another world war:

"If the international Jewish financiers in and outside of Europe should again succeed in plunging the nations into a world war, the result will be not the Bolshevization of the globe and thus victory for Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

Although a world and decades apart, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith and Adolph Hitler share one important ideological common denominator: the destruction of their hated enemies is the responsibility of the victims, not the murderers, even when the murderers initiate the violence.

### **PART THREE: THE EMERGING AMERICAN NATIONAL SECURITY PREDICAMENT**

*How can the US protect itself against a terrorist nuclear threat?*

We know from Part One that Al Qaeda poses a threat to the US because it wants to end the American physical and political

presence in the Muslim world. Toward this end, Al Qaeda has adapted the War Paradigm, a sustained campaign against American targets aimed at making it too costly for the US to have a

foreign policy influence in Islamic countries. Part Two demonstrated that obtaining nuclear capabilities is consistent with the Al Qaeda War Paradigm strategy and that there are good reasons to suspect

that the terrorist organization has acquired nuclear capabilities and is motivated to use them against American targets.

This section examines how the US can protect itself against a terrorist nuclear threat. As we will see, the risk of terrorist nuclear blackmail gives rise to an American national security predicament that is unprecedented in scope. This predicament must be addressed and resolved for the sake of protecting American cities and citizens at home, as well as US freedom of action abroad. That it is resolved is not only in the best national interest of the US, but all countries.

### **Prevention**

The first line of defense against a nuclear threat is to prevent the enemy from obtaining nuclear capabilities, or to have him get rid of those he already has.

Throughout the years, the US and the international community have taken multilateral and bilateral steps to avoid the proliferation of nuclear capabilities, both in states that do not have nuclear weapons (horizontal prevention), as well as among states that do (vertical prevention). For example, the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, which received almost complete international support, aimed to eliminate all nuclear weapons. Since then, the US and the Soviet Union, and later its successor state Russia, have entered into several agreements aimed at realizing this goal. For example, START II requires the US and Russian nuclear arsenals to be reduced to 3,500 and 3,000 nuclear weapons respectively.

In October 1999, nuclear disarmament suffered a major setback when the US Senate refused to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that would make all future nuclear weapon testing illegal. The

Senators critical of the treaty argued that it was not in the US' best interest to ratify the treaty because it would not stop rogue states and terrorists from procuring nuclear weapons.

The argument that the treaty would not prevent terrorists from obtaining nuclear capabilities was absolutely correct. After all, no terrorist groups were invited to nuclear arms control talks. However, what the argument lacked in logic was that not signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty also would not prevent terrorists from obtaining nuclear capabilities.

Is it at all possible to prevent terrorists with enough money, resources, and determination from obtaining nuclear weapons?

The good news is that the Clinton administration took a number of steps to reduce, or eliminate altogether, the nuclear leakage from the former Soviet Union. The bad news is that the nuclear leakage has so far not been reduced completely, and that in some cases, it might have been too late. Hence, while efforts like the US Nunn-Lugar program have been good steps toward the prevention of horizontal proliferation of nuclear capabilities to terrorist groups, it might have been a case of too little, too late. Especially troublesome is the existence of the Russian suitcase bombs, some of which are reported to have landed in the hands of terrorists within the Al Qaeda network.

In sum, it might be too late to prevent nuclear capabilities from falling into the hands of Al Qaeda terrorists. If not, there are steps that might be taken, and the imperative to do so is great because of Al Qaeda's stated ambition to acquire nuclear capabilities and proven willingness to create mass destruction.

### **Deterrence**

The second line of defense against a nuclear threat is deterrence. Deterrence is simply defined as the capability of dissuading somebody from doing something by instilling in them a fear of the consequences following that action.

The making of a successful deterrence strategy requires a known adversary and access to information about his or her motivations, preferences, and capabilities. It also requires that the adversary be rational, meaning that he is capable of making a cost-benefit analysis after the US has communicated what will happen if the action at which deterrence is aimed occurs. Also very important is that retaliation for a nuclear attack must be agreed upon internally and clearly communicated to the enemy ahead of time.

Unfortunately, when it comes to nuclear terrorism, deterrence is not what it used to be.

First of all, it is very difficult to know whom to threaten, whom to deter. In this case, the answer is obviously that Al Qaeda needs to be deterred. Unfortunately, deterrence might be virtually impossible because non-state actors such as terrorists do not operate with the same pay-off matrix as states do, or in accordance with the same constraints and considerations. The logic of deterrence does not apply in the same way as cases of states with nuclear capabilities. That is, the Al Qaeda network is loosely organized in ad-hoc groups, rather than one physical unit like the nation-state.

At the end of the day, deterring terrorists may be impossible, or extremely difficult at best, because the terrorist nuclear threat represents a case that does not live up to the conditions necessary for deterrence to work.

The US can, of course, retaliate against the state sponsor of terrorism. One problem is that it may be difficult to determine which state to threaten with retaliatory actions, because the terrorists may be loosely organized, sometimes even across many states. For example, the Al Qaeda network has reportedly been active in countries such as Bangladesh, Bosnia, Chechnya, India (Kashmir), Pakistan, Tajikistan, Somalia, and Kosovo, just to mention a few. Despite this international spread, in terms of Al Qaeda, Afghanistan would likely be the primary choice since it has provided a base for the terrorist organization.

Afghanistan's motivations and preferences may be assumed to be more rational, especially when it comes to issues of military retaliatory actions (although Taliban responses to US demands after September 11 might call that assumption into question).

Given the international distribution of the Al Qaeda network, however, would it be reasonable to make Afghanistan the target of a retaliatory nuclear strike in the same way we threatened the destruction of the Soviet Union during the Cold War? Should Afghanistan become the target of a nuclear retaliatory strike if we can't be certain how much the Taliban regime knew about the impending nuclear strike against the US?

The US has indeed made Afghanistan the target for military actions after September 11, but for different reasons. Recent military actions undertaken by the US are aimed at destroying the Al Qaeda terrorist network and the regime that has allowed it to flourish. This is a case of military action substantially different from that of deterrence through guaranteed nuclear retaliation. In order to punish Afghanistan for an Al Qaeda nuclear attack on the US,

the American government would in effect have to hold the Afghani people nuclear hostage. This is not a very likely proposition given the lack of a real connection between a nation-state (read: physical space with a population base and a government that controls the two) and the nuclear threat. And what if the terrorist nuclear threat takes place after the Taliban no longer controls Afghanistan?

Another problem involves the level of retaliatory violence. Because retaliatory action must be clearly announced in advance to alter the cost-benefit analysis of the state, the level of violence must be determined prior. This is difficult because the exact capabilities of the terrorists are not always known. If the retaliatory level is too low, it might not states from aiding terrorists. If the level is too high, the US would lose moral and political capital around the world, especially in the Muslim world, which at this point forms the most likely target of a retaliatory attack. That could risk widening the gap between the Muslim world and the US, which is the ultimate goal of terrorists like bin Laden, hence not an appropriate American response.

This means that the level of retaliation would have to correspond to the level of damage inflicted upon the US, which in terms of a terrorist nuclear attack might mean great destruction of one or more population centers in the target state. The scenario, then, is that the US, in return for the destruction of a part of an American city, would destroy a city like the Afghan capital Kabul. This is not a realistic proposition because the destruction of that population center and the Afghan regime's failure to prevent a case of nuclear terrorism are just too far apart conceptually, as opposed to during the Cold War when the Soviet regime and the nuclear threat were closely linked.

In short, deterring terrorists from using nuclear weapons might be virtually impossible, and deterring terrorists by threatening a state that has facilitated them may be difficult because that might be too detached from the terrorist nuclear attack, and thus a retaliatory nuclear strike against it may be too unrealistic from a strategic, political, and moral perspective.

## **Defense**

The third and ultimate line of defense against a nuclear threat is an actual defense of some sort.

In the fall of 1999, the Pentagon tested the missile interceptor that would be part of a limited American missile-defense system. When senior Pentagon officials met with the Russian Foreign Minister in April 2000, they did their best to reassure him that the system, were it to be implemented, would not be sufficient to threaten Russia's strategic nuclear deterrence. In other words, US officials stressed that the Cold War doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (with the very appropriate acronym MAD) would survive the deployment of a limited American missile-defense system, the purpose of which would be to counter only a small number of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles launched by rogue states (North Korea being named as the most immediate threat). Once President Bush took office in January 2001, he continued the pursuit of a limited missile-defense system, much to the disapproval of Russia, which wanted no violation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Many critics of the limited missile-defense system have argued that the system won't work: that it is impossible to effectively "shoot down a bullet with a bullet." Others have stressed that it would create both horizontal and vertical nuclear proliferation. No matter

what one thinks of the technical feasibility of the system or what effect it would have on international nuclear weapon developments, one thing is absolutely clear. In terms of Al Qaeda, a limited missile-defense system would most likely be irrelevant, because even if the system worked flawlessly, the risk of terrorists using ballistic missiles is insignificant. Much more likely is a covert attack, against which a missile-defense system can do nothing. The alternative defense approach in this case could be a civil defense that could limit damage, but not prevent it.

There may simply be no shield when it comes to defending the US against a terrorist nuclear threat.

### **Could the Worst be Yet to Come?**

The Cold War is over, and with it, the threat that two superpowers governed by opposite political ideologies might launch thousands of strategic nuclear weapons against each other's populations. The collapse of the Soviet Union, and with it its Communist empire, should have been the best of times. But like Dickens' novel, it was the worst of times as well, as the disintegration of the Soviet Union opened a floodgate of fissile material, technical know-how, and tactical nuclear weapons for sale on the international black market.

While the knowledge that the Soviets had thousands of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons at its disposal created fear in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 21<sup>st</sup> century might actually require us to face a worse nuclear nightmare scenario: that a terrorist organization bent on creating mass destruction in the US and killing as many Americans as possible may have obtained a few loose nuclear devices.

This might not seem worse than the Cold War nuclear threat, since the quantity involved would

be substantially less. But it is worse in one very important way: the prevention mechanisms in place may no longer be effective. In other words, while a *deliberate* Cold War nuclear exchange would have been totally devastating, but was extremely unlikely, a terrorist nuclear detonation today would be of limited damage, but is far more likely.

We now know there is evidence that the Al Qaeda terrorist network might have nuclear capabilities, is motivated to use them, and may not hesitate to unleash total destruction on the US. There should be no doubt as to the validity of the latter after September 11.

It is beginning to become painfully clear that nuclear terrorism, or more precisely, nuclear blackmail, constitutes an unprecedented American national security predicament. Still, though it may be historically unparalleled, American policy makers have known of its severity since the early days of the atomic age. The US Secretary of War Henry Stimson issued this warning to President Harry Truman in April of 1945:

"The future may see a time when [a nuclear] weapon may be constructed in secret and used suddenly and effectively with devastating power by a willful nation or group against an unsuspecting nation or group of much greater size and material power. With its aid even a very powerful unsuspecting nation might be conquered within a very few days by a very smaller one."

While Mr. Stimson's warning highlights how vulnerable we are to terrorist nuclear blackmail, we are not helpless. We have the best trained, best equipped, and technically most sophisticated military in the world. That military might includes excellent intelligence gathering capabilities, such as those of the National

Security Agency. It also includes a group of extremely well trained, highly motivated special forces that could penetrate any storage location in the world where terrorist nuclear weapons were being kept and neutralize them. If it is militarily possible to do something along those lines, the US military would be able to do it. At the end of the day, we have a military that is superior to any in existence at this point in time, as well as in the history of the world. Still, despite our superior military might, the most realistic US policy options for meeting a terrorist nuclear threat might not be military ones.

The US government took nuclear terrorism seriously before September 11, as evidenced by the government's counterterrorism policy to (1) not make any concessions to terrorists or to strike any deals; (2) bring terrorists to justice; (3) isolate and pressure states that sponsor terrorism; and (4) bolster the counterterrorism capabilities of countries friendly to the US that require assistance.

These are all good policies.

Unfortunately, although the American government has reacted to the risk of nuclear terrorism, government efforts, including the capabilities of the US military and law enforcement, can ultimately only reduce the risk and the consequences, should a terrorist nuclear attack take place. A case in point of how difficult it can be to prevent all terrorism despite the high priority of doing so may be found in the Israeli experience: despite its efforts to prevent terrorism by all means necessary, Israel still experiences terrorist acts.

This fact has profound implications for the US as far as the security of fortress America at home, US freedom of action abroad, and the ability of the global community to govern effectively are concerned. There are national

security experts who warn of scenarios that could force the US to abandon some of its current policies, basically arguing that mass-scale terrorism such as a terrorist nuclear threat could prevent the US from keeping a military and political presence in the Muslim world.

Are we so sensitive to terrorist nuclear blackmail so that we might actually have to give in to it?

Potentially, yes, considering that the US might not be able to prevent terrorists from acquiring nuclear capabilities, deter them from using them, or defend itself against a terrorist nuclear attack. Add to this that if federal, state, and local law enforcement are unable to pick up and address the vulnerability that the military might not be able to, the future that Mr. Stimson warned of may soon be the present. If Mr. Stimson's dire prediction becomes reality, there may be few options left for the US as far as policy is concerned, because nuclear terrorism gives rise to a vulnerability that the American superior military might and excellent law enforcement capabilities might not be able to resolve.

In a worst case scenario, the only real option the US may have is to change its current policy of never making any concessions and comply with the demands of terrorists with nuclear capabilities. In the case of Al Qaeda threatening a nuclear detonation in one or more American cities, this would mean that the US would have to comply with the demand that it leave the Muslim world physically and politically.

If the US did not give in to terrorist nuclear blackmail, the alternative would be to sacrifice the American citizens who live in the population centers likely to form the targets of nuclear attacks. This is a terrible alternative since the role of the US government is to protect the American people.

Nuclear attacks on US cities would not only cause tremendous physical destruction, but also tremendous political, social, and economic fallout. This is evident from the impact the September 11 attacks have had so far on the US economy and national psyche.

US capitulation to terrorist nuclear blackmail is a very unattractive scenario, but so is the alternative: that the US would not give in and the destruction of American cities and the people in them would follow. At this point, these scenarios are not confirmed reality, but rather, plausible future worst-case scenarios. But if Al Qaeda has acquired, or soon acquires, nuclear capabilities, the US could find itself between a rock and a hard place in regard to policy options.

Although there is little evidence that terrorism has changed any key US policy issues in the past, it could be the case that the nuclear terrorist threat will alter that pattern. If the US changes its policies vis-à-vis its Muslim allies in order to protect itself against nuclear terrorism, the terrorists would have achieved their goals.

This is not only a setback in terms of the American ability to optimize its national interests around the world, but also a very dangerous proposition in terms of the ability of the legitimate international community to set an agenda. If terrorists can alter state policies with the help of nuclear weapons, the ability of the legitimate global community to govern effectively diminishes, since nuclear capabilities would then provide non-state actors such as terrorists with a *de facto* veto right. In other words, if we consider the ability of the global community to govern effectively to be a core value that must be protected, the non-military nuclear security issues that the US faces pose a threat not only to the US, but to all states.

A small minority of Americans has shared some of the sentiments expressed by the Al Qaeda terrorists and others in the Muslim world since September 11: that American foreign policy was in part to blame for the terrorist attacks. The arguments put forth have been that we drew the attacks by virtue of our support of unpopular regimes in the Muslim world, sanctions against Iraq, and uncompromising support of Israel.

These sentiments are completely ridiculous, not to mention insulting to the September 11 victims and their families.

Even if these arguments had merit, the US should not change its foreign policy because of the September 11 attacks or the threat of future attacks on America. We must not allow terrorists to change American foreign policy by committing mass destruction in the US and mass murder of Americans. If American foreign policy should change for moral or political reasons, that is an issue that needs to be addressed after we've destroyed the Al Qaeda network and eliminated future threats from it.

A historical parallel ought to make this case more clear.

One of the grievances the Nazis had, and one of the reasons they managed to mobilize popular support, was the widespread German sentiment against the post-World War I Treaty of Versailles. This treaty, put together without the involvement of Germany, forced Germany to take sole responsibility for World War I, give up its colonies, and limit its military might. When World War I ended, there had been no clear victor or loser, only an armistice that ultimately forced a politically weak Germany to accept the responsibility of the loser in a war most Germans felt Germany had not lost. This bred resentment in Germany, which in part explains

the Nazi rise to power and subsequently World War II.

Should the US have refused to fight the Nazis because Germany might have had a legitimate grievance against the Treaty of Versailles? Of course not!

Did the US need to take into consideration after World War II how the peace could be maintained by preventing yet another unfortunate war conclusion? Did the Allies need to learn from history and make sure that the ensuing peace would not contain the seed of the next war? Absolutely!

Let us say hypothetically, for the sake of argument, that US foreign policy in the Muslim world could have been different, or better if you wish. If so, we need to review American foreign policy

after we've eliminated the forces behind the September 11 attack on the US, just as we destroyed the Nazis before we helped build a democratic, peaceful, and secure Europe with the help of the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine.

However, if we can't prevent, deter, or defend ourselves against terrorist nuclear blackmail, the US government could be left with only two options. One, to witness further destruction of US targets and mass murder of Americans. Two, to prevent this by giving in to terrorist demands.

These are both very unattractive scenarios for the security of fortress America at home, our freedom of action abroad, and the post-Cold War era. Because we should never submit to terrorist threats, the time

to find the right solution to this vulnerability is now, before this worst-case scenario nightmare turns from a hypothetical predicament to a real one. The good news is that the US government is currently looking for solutions. For example, scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory are examining ways a terrorist nuclear attack might take place and trying to identify appropriate US responses. This is a good first step.

More is needed, however. Awareness of the problem allows us to address it early on. Let us hope that we will never have to face terrorist nuclear blackmail, prepare contingency plans just in case, and pray that if we need to confront it we won't tire, falter, or fail in our pursuit of national security.

## EPILOGUE

As the first edition of this article was concluded in early November of 2001, the war in Afghanistan was almost a month old. As the month reached its second half, the Northern Alliance had made dramatic gains. By the time you read this, the war might be over. Perhaps bin Laden will be dead. Perhaps we will be facing thousands of bin Ladens abroad and at home.

We do not know what course the bio-terrorism war on the home front will take. Have we found the person or people who sent letters filled with anthrax spores? Perhaps they were not people connected to the September 11 attacks. Maybe they were home grown terrorists. It is not likely, but it is possible. After September 11, anything seems possible. Nothing is what it once was, or appeared to be.

Will Al Qaeda have proven to have nuclear capabilities? I hope not. But if it does, will we be vulnerable to an unprecedented degree? Very possibly. While we ought to hope for the best, understanding the plausibility and severity of a potential terrorist nuclear threat means that we can prepare for and reduce the risk of the worst being yet to come. The imperative to do so is great. The time to do it is now.