



APOCALYPTIC TERROR: CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF JIHADI TERRORISM

Animesh Roul

The threat of chemical and biological terrorism emanating from non-state actors, including the Islamic Jihadi organisations, which control large swathes of territories and resources, remains a major concern for nation states today. Over the years, the capability and intentions of Islamic jihadist groups have changed. They evidently prefer for more destructive and spectacular methods. This can be very well argued that if these weapons systems, materials or technologies were made available to them, they probably would use it against their enemy to maximize the impact and fear factor. Even though no terrorist group, including the Al Qaeda, so far has achieved success in employing these destructive and disruptive weapons systems or materials, in reality, various terrorist groups have been seeking to acquire WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction/Disruption) materials and its know-how.

The threat of chemical and biological terrorism emanating from non-state actors, including the Islamic Jihadi organisations, which control large swathes of territories and resources, remains a major concern for nation states today. Historically, no organised terrorist groups have perpetrated violent attacks using biological or chemical agents so far. Over the years, the capability and intentions of Islamic jihadist groups have changed. They are evidently preferring for more destructive and spectacular methods. This can be very well argued that if these weapons systems, materials or technologies were made available to them, they probably would use it against their enemy to maximize the impact and fear factor. Even though no terrorist group, including the Al Qaeda, so far has achieved success in employing these destructive and disruptive weapons systems or materials, in reality, various terrorist groups have been seeking to acquire WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction/Disruption) materials and its know-how.

Much of the literature focused on these speculations and debates during the last decade have shed enough light on the unlikelihood or impossibility of chem- bio terrorism inflicted by Islam-centric Jihadist groups. The argument against the possibilities of such terrorism mostly centered on the premise that technological challenges would be a hindrance for Jihadist groups to weaponize the chem/bio materials (or pathogens) and deliver them to cause a catastrophic event. This is also somewhat substantiated by the lack of real terrorist events involving chemical or biological weapon materials. Besides events like 2001 Anthrax scare and the 1995 Japanese Subway attacks by Aum Shinrikyo cult, so far chemical or biological weapons have not played a major role in jihadi operations.

However, many Islamic ideologues and jihadists have accepted the use of biological and chemical weapons as legitimate act of war for mass killings of non-believers. In 2003, Saudi cleric Nasir bin Hamd al-Fahd brought out a treatise on the legal status of using weapons for mass killings, especially against non- believers.¹ Anti-west Islamic clerics like Kuwaiti Professor Abdullah Nafisi reignited the debate on the possibility of chem-bio terrorism events by non-state actors or Islamic Jihadists thereby forcing the naysayers to rethink their conclusions regarding the WMD terrorism event.²

There are also newer evidences that suggest that groups like Al Qaeda and its most violent offshoot, the Islamic State (formerly ISIS), are more than capable of using chemical and biological weapon materials targeting civilian population or military. Their intentions to use these types of weapons have been made clear through available jihadi literatures. The religious extremists, whether in Pakistan or in Syria, want to take

¹ Nasiir Bin Hamad Al-Fahd, "A Treatise on The Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction against Infidels", at <https://ahlussunnahpublicaties.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/42288104-nasir-al-fahd-the-ruling-on-using-weapons-of-mass-destruction-against-the-infidels.pdf> (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

²Abdullah Al-Nafisi, A professor and cleric based in Kuwait, in early February 2009, recommended biological and nuclear attacks on the United States and praised terrorists like Mullah Omar of Afghanistan Taliban. Al-Jazeera TV (Qatar), February 2, 2009 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16G2BvB4TPw> (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

over the State and its military arsenals, industries and infrastructures. Such a mindset amongst the extremists has increased the specter of chem/bio terrorism scenarios in multitude in recent years.

Moreover, the looming threat is no more based on fear or imagination. The changing jihadi strategy on weapons of war, credible evidences of their focus to seize or acquire WMDs and their willingness to use these weapons to inflict mass fatality or injury make this issue urgent for policy discourse.

Jihadist Perspective

Various Jihadist ideologies (e.g. Takfir³ or Salafis) reveal that there is no authoritative religious or moral doctrine behind the jihadist struggle, their attacks or operations. It has been subject to varied and sometimes conflicting interpretations of Islam, jihad and violence. And most successfully, the ideologies are interpreted and reinterpreted to serve a specific cause (e.g. anti-western or anti-Hindu targets or anti-Shia Muslims) only to perpetrate indiscriminate violence for their so-called cause against the non-believers.

A close scrutiny of jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda's effort to acquire chemical and biological weapons suggests that there is the intention and an ongoing effort to poses chemical and biological weapons. Even though there is no evidence that Al Qaeda or its franchises (e.g. Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have developed any sort of chemical or biological weapon capability, a few examples would suffice to show ample motivations and effort behind their possible acquisition and ultimate use.

The slain leader of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, had said in one of his rare interviews with Pakistan journalist, Rahimullah Yusufzai, in late 1998 that acquiring weapons for the defense of Muslims (in this case as asked by the journalist—nuclear and chemical weapons) was a “religious duty” for Muslims. He further underscored that “If I have indeed acquired these 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 harm on Muslims.”⁴

Similarly, Bin Laden's second in command and now the leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri, planned to undertake a program known as “Yogurt Project” or ‘Project al-

³ Takfir refers to the practice of excommunication, where one Muslim (from the dominant Sunni sect) declaring another Muslim as kafir (apostate) and justifies the killing of the apostate. It abhor Shiism too as a deviant Islam. Its followers are often called Takfiris. The Salafi is an ultra-conservative movement within Sunni Islam that believes in fundamentalist approach to Islam, emulating the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers.

⁴ “Wrath of God”, *Time*, January 11, 1999 at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2054517,00.html> (Accessed on September 15, 2015).

Zabadi' to develop chemical and biological weapons. This program reportedly had a proposed start-up budget of US \$2,000 to \$4,000 and was handled by Abu Khabab al-Masri, an Al Qaeda commander and former scientist in the Egyptian chemical weapons program.⁵ This can be seen together with Al Qaeda's "Encyclopedia of Jihad," which provides early insights into the strategy and operational aspect of the group and its network.⁶ The 11th volume of the Encyclopedia offers guidance on how to disperse potentially lethal biological organisms and poisons, ranging from botulinum toxin, anthrax and ricin. This volume also details targets such as water and food supplies and how to maximize panic and fear by poisoning medicines. The other treatise, which is considered to be Jihadi chem/bio manual, is Abu Hadhifa al-Shami's 'A Course in Popular Poisons and Deadly Gases.'⁷

However, the most dreadful insights has come from another Al Qaeda leader, Anwar al Awlaki, member of the Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) who was chief war strategist for the group. He rationalized the option citing classical Islamic scholars primarily to remove moral and Islamic legal barriers on the use of these weapons against civilians (non-combatants). He observed, "The use of poisons of chemical and biological weapons against population centers is allowed and strongly recommended due to the effect on the enemy."⁸ He cited the Islamic scholars to prove that it is allowed to use poison or other methods of mass killing against the 'disbelievers' in a war. Awlaki noted this piece of his advice and thoughts in the eighth edition of the Al Qaeda's magazine 'Inspire'. In the article entitled "Targeting the Populations of Countries at War With Muslims" (Inspire, Vol. 8, 2011)⁹ al-Awlaki justifies the killing of women and children and the use of chemical and biological weapons in addition to bombings and gun attacks.

Al Qaeda and Chem/Bio Weapons

There may be a mismatch between Al Qaeda's intent and its actual capability until now. These information and statements by Islamists or Jihadist ideologues are certainly significant and worrisome. That certainly indicates a clear Jihadist strategy, intent and

⁵ "Inside Al-Qaeda's Hard Drive", *The Atlantic*, September 1, 2004, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/09/inside-al-qaeda-s-hard-drive/303428/> (Accessed on September 15, 2015).

⁶ "The encyclopedia of Jihad' was found in 1999 in the home of Khalil Deek, *al Qaeda* linked businessman when he was arrested in connection with an alleged plot to bomb Jordan's main airport in the capital, Amman, on the eve of the millennium.

⁷ Abu Hadhifa al-Shami's, "A Course in Popular Poisons and Deadly Gases", Islamic Media Center (unspecified Year), a summary at "Survey of Prevalent Al-Qa' ida Manuals", at <https://www.aclu.org/files/fbimappingfoia/20150309/ACLURM016597.pdf> (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

⁸ Tim Lister and Paul Cruickshank, "From the grave, al-Awlaki calls for bio-chem attacks on the U.S." *CNN*, May 2, 2012, at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/02/from-the-grave-al-awlaki-calls-for-bio-chem-attacks-on-the-u-s/> (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

⁹ Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula, "Inspire", Al-Malahem Media, Vol. 8, Fall 2011, pp, 41-47. (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

possible effort to build an arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. Past allegations and evidences suggest that Al Qaeda has attempted to build a CBW capability. The report on Jalalabad camp and videotape that recorded experiments involving dogs using cyanide or crude nerve agents remain the most plausible testimony of Al Qaeda's CBW effort.¹⁰ The first stream of information came from Ahmed Ressum, an Algerian Al Qaeda member, who revealed that during late 1990s he had undergone training in chem/bio warfare in Afghanistan and learned techniques to use poisonous substances.

With regard to biological agents, most of the allegations are centered on its effort to acquire or develop an effective capability. Again reports in the 1990s informed that associates of Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden attempted to purchase anthrax, plague and other agents from Kazakhstan and Czech Republic. Even there are confirmed reports about the Al Qaeda's interests in acquiring crop dusters to disseminate biological agents over cities or population centers.¹¹ The examples of Abdur Rauf and Menad Benchellali's interest in Anthrax and Ricin are also imperative to examine how Al Qaeda pursued and trained its network members to carry out chem/bio operations.

Islamic State and Chem-Bio Weapons

The present day ISIS or the so called Islamic State has strong roots in the ideals of Abu Mushab al Zarqawi of Jordan and Jihadi ideologue like Ibn Taymiyyah who propounded the logic of 'Book' for guidance and 'Sword' for victory. IS also adheres to guidelines noted by Abu Bakr Naji about extreme retaliatory violence to deter enemies in a jihadi manual titled (translated) "Management of Savagery."¹² Abu Mushab Zarqawi and his lingering influence as a founding father of IS leads us to believe that the violent group won't hesitate to use chem/bio weapons against the enemy. He was identified as al Qaeda's chief biochemical engineer,¹³ before his death in 2006 and it was widely believed that Zarqawi imparted training to a special terror cell in Afghanistan and Iraq on the use of bio/chem agents for possible attacks in Europe and the Middle East.¹⁴

¹⁰ "Al-Qaida videos show poison gas tests shows first samples from a cache of tapes", *CNN*, August 20, 2002.

¹¹ Sammy Salama and Lydia Hansell, "Does Intent Equal Capability? Al-Qaeda And Weapons Of Mass Destruction", *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 12, No 3, November 2005 at <http://cns.miis.edu/npr/pdfs/123salama.pdf> (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

¹² Abu Bakr Naji, "The Management of Savagery" 2004, (Translated by William McCants, 2006), at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf> (Accessed on September 18, 2015).

¹³ Animesh Roul, "Overshadowing Osama: Abu Mushab al-Zarqawi as Terror Master Mind" Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, October 23, 2004 at <http://www.ipcs.org/article/suicide-terrorism-in-iraq/overshadowing-osama-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-as-terror-master-mind-1539.html> (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

¹⁴ By June 2002, under Zarqawi's command there were crude chemical and biological training and experiments in Khurmali camp located in northeastern Iraq. Most of the associates infiltrated European countries for a coordinated ricin and cyanide attacks by late 2002. See, a timeline of Zarqawi's activities and evolution of IS. Hassan Hassan "The secret world of Isis training camps - ruled by sacred texts and the sword", *The Guardian* (UK), January 25, 2015, at

There are evidences to suggest how Jordan's secret service establishment foiled a plot to detonate a chemical weapon capable of killing thousands of people and to attack the US Embassy and Prime Minister's office with poison gas in April 2004.

Latest findings, especially a seizure of IS laptop and purported attacks using seized chemical weapons, have brought the world's attention towards Islamic State's intention and capability.¹⁵ The information on the laptop of a Tunisian IS militant suggests their interest to acquire or develop a biological weapon capability, even if they can be used effectively. A 19-page document in Arabic found in that laptop was on how to develop biological weapons and how to weaponize the bubonic plague from infected animals.¹⁶ The instruction found on the laptop describing the benefits of biological agents indicated IS approval on the work to weaponize the bubonic plague and other viruses that would have an even greater affect than that of a localized chemical attack.

What is more alarming is that the laptop information had a message of religious approval for the use of such weapons. It reportedly read, "If the Muslims can't overwhelm the infidels in any other way, they are allowed to use weapons of mass destruction to kill everyone and erase them and their descendants from the earth."¹⁷ The 26-page fatwa was issued by the Saudi jihadi cleric Nasir al- Fahd, who is currently imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. To note, this could be a May 2003 fatwa written by Nasir al- Fahd and endorsed by Ali al-Khudair, another radical cleric. Following al Fahd's arrest (on May 28, 20003), Saudi intelligence agency found cyanide in an Al Qaeda safehouse in Riyadh. Al-Fahd is the author of a book that approved the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction against the non-believers.¹⁸

As the IS is advancing for territorial gains in Iraq and Syria at present, it can be speculated that sooner or later it will capture secret labs and factories that can facilitate to pursue chem/bio activities. In June 2014, there were reports suggesting that IS had captured Saddam Hussein era chemical facility at Muthanna, near the city of Samarra.¹⁹ By mid October 2014, there were unconfirmed reports from Kobani where Kurdish minorities were fighting against IS forces that unidentified chemical weapon was used

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/25/inside-isis-training-camps> (Accessed on September 12, 2015).

¹⁵ Danny Gold, "Seized Islamic State Laptop Reveals Research Into Weaponizing the Bubonic Plague", *Vice News*, August 29, 2014 at <https://news.vice.com/article/seized-islamic-state-laptop-reveals-research-into-weaponizing-the-bubonic-plague> (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Cited in "ISIS laptop reveals project to build biological weapons", *Ynet News*, August 29, 2014, at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4566367,00.html> (Accessed on September 01, 2014).

¹⁸ See, "A Treatise on the Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction Against Infidels" at <https://ahlussunnahpublicaties.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/42288104-nasir-al-fahd-the-ruling-on-using-weapons-of-mass-destruction-against-the-infidels.pdf> (Accessed on September 11, 2015).

¹⁹ "Sunni Extremists in Iraq Occupy Hussein's Chemical Weapons Facility", *The Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2014 at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/sunni-extremists-in-iraq-occupy-saddams-chemical-weapons-facility-1403190600?mod=djemalertNEWS> (Accessed on September 19, 2015).

by the IS militants.²⁰

The claim from the IS side regarding the possession of chemical weapons, such as Mustard agents, came in late August 2015 from a Dutch soldier turned ISIS fighter identified as Omar Yilmaz, who indicated that the group has acquired chemical weapons once belonging to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Yilmaz's revelations came with a series of suspected incidents of mustard gas attacks in northern Iraq and Syria.²¹

Independent sources such as Conflict Armament Research (CAR) and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) have claimed that the IS has used chemical weapons several times against Kurdish forces between January -June 2015. In August this year, the German Defence Ministry too reported IS's chemical weapon use in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. The same month, the United States officials stationed in Iraq claimed that ISG have used sulphur-mustard in a mortar attack on Kurdish forces in Makhmour town located in Northern Iraq. The location has been in the news and a battlefield between the Kurdish forces and the Islamic State.²²

Various information are still flowing from the war theaters about the use of Mustard gas by the IS forces in Iraq and Syria.²³ And while ISIS may not yet have the most potent chemical agents, they will ultimately possess them in future as they advance towards their objectives.

Taliban and Chem-Bio Weapons

Taliban groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan are not totally averse to the idea of chemi/bio war. Past investigations and reports suggest that Al Qaeda's Abu Khabab al-Masri (also known as Midhat Mursi) and his knowledge and training of chemical and biological weapons had helped Taliban groups in the region. Al-Masri provided Afghanistan Taliban poisons and explosives training in his hideout at Derunta camp, near Jalalabad (Afghanistan).

Taking pride in Al Masri's body of works and contributions, Al Qaeda leader Mustafa Abu al-Yazeed once issued a statement warning that al-Masri had "left behind [...] a

²⁰ Emma Graham-Harrison, "Kurds fear Isis use of chemical weapon in Kobani", *The Guardian*, October 24, 2014 at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/24/kurds-fear-isis-chemical-weapon-kobani> (Accessed on September 19, 2015).

²¹ See, Omar Yilmaz's statement cited in "Where Did ISIS Get Its Chemical Weapons?", *Daily Beast*, September 2, 2015.

²² Andrew Tilghman, "U.S. confirms Islamic State use of chemical weapons, *Military Times*, August 21, 2015.

²³ "Poisonous gas attack by ISIS leads to fears terrorists are mass producing Chemical Weapons", *Express News (UK)*, August 14, 2015, at <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/598302/ISIS-chemical-weapons-Jihadis-launch-poisonous-gas-attack-in-mortar-shells> (Accessed on September 28, 2015); "ISIS is using chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq, US Government reveals", *Express News (UK)* September 11, 2015 at <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/604545/ISIS-terrorism-chemical-weapons-> (Accessed on September 28, 2015).

generation of faithful students who will make you suffer the worst torture and avenge him and his brothers.”²⁴ The CB weapon threat continues even after Masri’s still mysterious death.

There were reported use of non-lethal chemical weapons by Afghan and Pakistan Taliban groups in the past against both military and civilians. In April- May 2009, Afghan Taliban, who have been campaigning against female education, had targeted several girl schools located in north of Kabul in Kapisa and Parwan provinces. These attacks involved use of poisonous chemical gas and the victims complained of headaches, nausea, vomiting and itching in the eyes.²⁵ Nearly 200 students and teachers were affected in these attacks. Though the specific type of gas used remains mysterious, it is suspected that Taliban and al Qaeda elements must have experimented with either chlorine or white phosphorus. Same year, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) had threatened to unleash a chemical warfare against Pakistan and planned to use the age old tactics of mass disruption by poisoning Multan, Karachi and Rawalpindi water supplies.²⁶

Is South Asia Vulnerable to CBW Terror Event?

South Asia or the Indian Subcontinent has been always vulnerable to jihadist violence, mostly from the above-mentioned groups. Also the common theme of these jihadi groups is to unleash the battle of the apocalypse, as per the Islamic end-of-time prophecies. And the jihadists believe that Khorasan (major part of Central Asia, Pakistan and parts of India) is the region from which they will inflict a major defeat against their enemies—in the Islamic version of Armageddon. Both Al Qaeda and ISIS promote this concept of Islamic Eschatology to recruit, indoctrinate and motivate cadres in their operations.

South Asia, especially India, has not faced a single CBW related terrorism incident involving non-state actors so far, be it the Al Qaeda or Lashkar-e-Taiba. However, in October 2010 a purported threat letter from Indian Mujahedeen group’s Assam wing threatened to launch a biological war in the northeast state. Their demands were to (1) free all jihadi leaders held at the Guwahati central jail; (2) end operations against jihadi

²⁴ “Al Qaeda confirms death of bomb maker Abu Khabab al-Masri”, *Associated Press/Daily News*, August 03, 2008 at <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/al-qaeda-confirms-death-bombmaker-abu-khabab-al-masri-article-1.312624> (Accessed on September 17, 2015).

²⁵ “Scores of Afghan girls ill in third school poisoning”, *Reuters*, May 12, 2009, at http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/05/12/us-afghanistan-poisoning-sb-idUSTRE54A1IR_20090512 (Accessed on September 19, 2015); Also See, AnimeshRoul, “Taliban and Weapons of Mass Disruption Threat”, *CBW Magazine*, Vol. 3 (2), January 2010, at http://www.idsa.in/cbwmagazine/TalibanandWeaponsofMassDisruptionThreat_aroul_0110 (Accessed on September 19, 2015).

²⁶ Ibid

forces in Assam; and (3) stop all ongoing development projects in Assam.

The Indian government has recognized chemical and biological weapons terrorism threat as real and imminent. Both the Defense and Home ministries have given high priority to this issue although so far India has not experienced anything remotely related to chem/bio terrorist events. Al Qaeda has recently renewed its efforts to gain a foothold within South Asia's teeming Muslim population with the establishment of AQIS (Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent). Similarly, the Islamic State has expanded its influence in the region and already has made inroads into India, Pakistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.²⁷ With the changing dynamics of jihadi engagements with state actors and their intention to acquire WMD capability that would give them advantage over their enemy, psychologically and militarily, it won't be difficult to speculate the future evolution of the chemical and biological terrorism threat in India and South Asia at large.

²⁷ See, Animesh Roul, "South Asia's Islamic State", *The Global Intelligence*, March 28, 2015, <http://theglobalintelligence.com/2015/03/28/south-asias-islamic-state/> (Accessed on September 19, 2015); For Sri Lankan case with regard to IS, See, "Islamic State threat emerges in Sri Lanka", IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor, September 10, 2015, at <http://www.janes.com/article/54189/osint-summary-islamic-state-threat-emerges-in-sri-lanka> (Accessed on September 19, 2015).

Animesh Roul is the Executive Director of Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict.

e-mail: animeshroul@gmail.com

NOTE

An abridged version of this research paper has been published in Namrata Goswami (ed) "*India's Approach To Asia Strategy, Geopolitics and Responsibility*", IDSA/ Pentagon Press, 2016. Roul presented his research at the [17th Asian Security Conference](#) (11-13 February 2015), Organised by the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

The **Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict (SSPC)** is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan research organization based in New Delhi, dedicated to conduct rigorous and comprehensive research, and work towards disseminating information through commentaries and analyses on a broad spectrum of issues relating to peace, conflict and human development. SSPC has been registered under the Societies Registration Act (XXI) of 1860. The SSPC came into being as a platform to exchange ideas, to undertake quality research, and to ensure a fruitful dialogue.

Copyright © Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, New Delhi

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without first obtaining written permission of the copyright owner.

Published by: Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. Post Box: 10560, JNU Old Campus, New Delhi-110067. Website: www.sspconline.org

We welcome your feedback. Email your comments at sspconline@gmail.com

Designed and typeset by Excel Solutions