Tactics and Technology Use: Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Terrorism?

So one can see, given some of the challenges that terrorists have faced in using more sophisticated or more novel types of weapons and explosives and their rate of failure, why perhaps terrorists haven't turn to so-called weapons of mass destruction, the use of chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons. But the fact that they haven't turned to them frequently or en mass, that it's been a relatively uncommon occurrence, doesn't mean that terrorists haven't tried or haven't stopped thinking about using them.

And here we see that as far back as 1992, Al-Qaeda first began its quest to acquire a nuclear weapon. Osama bin Laden sent his emissaries in 1993 and 1994 to various places throughout the world to try to obtain strategic nuclear material, enriched uranium with which to fabricate a nuclear bomb. None of his efforts were successful, but nonetheless, he wasn't deterred. Because we know in 1998 that bin Laden issued a proclamation, declaring that Muslims are entitled to use nuclear weapons and that it was every Muslim's duty to acquire a weapon of mass destruction for use against the United States.

And we see this very clearly demonstrated by the fact that on the eve of the September 11, 2001 attacks, two Pakistani scientists closely associated with that country's own development of nuclear weapons paid a visit to bin Laden in his compound outside of Kandahar, Afghanistan. There, they talked with bin Laden at length about the Al-Qaeda leader's desire to fabricate, to develop a nuclear weapon. They also talked about Al-Qaeda's ongoing efforts to perfect a variety of chemical and biological weapons.

So we see that, even while Al-Qaeda was in the process of executing the most historically important attack in the movement's history, it was already thinking and planning ahead, and already trying to move to even a higher level of death and destruction than we saw at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. In the decade since the September 11, 2001 attacks, we've seen almost a paradox where Al-Qaeda terrorists have gone to both ends of the WMD spectrum in an attempt to develop weapons.

On the one hand, for example, you have the discovery of ricin, actually a poison, a bio weapon, but a poison, in London in early 2003. Not necessarily to kill people, but the idea was to use the ricin to poison individuals and hopefully to cause a nationwide panic. Completely unsuccessful, but nonetheless very interesting that the terrorists themselves understood the psychological repercussions of even an unsuccessful attack using some novel or new type of weapon, such as a poison like ricin.

But then a year later in Amman, Jordan, the famed Al-Qaeda terrorist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, decided to stage not just a conventional terrorist attack, but an unconventional one, as well. He
chose three targets-- the prime minister's residence in Amman, the headquarters of the Jordanian intelligence agency, and the U.S. Embassy. And the idea was to drive huge trucks loaded with explosives in suicide attacks against each of those three targets, but then to follow those conventional explosive attacks with the release of deadly toxic chemicals into Amman's atmosphere.

Now we don't know whether it would have succeeded or not, because the Jordanian authorities were very effective in derailing the plot. But what the Jordanian authorities had predicted was that if Zarqawi's plot had succeeded, an estimated 80,000 persons could've been harmed or even killed. So here we have a fundamental paradox. Terrorists haven't completely lost interest in these exotic weapons, whether they're chemical or biological or poisons or what have you, and we see them using, or attempting to have used them, in recent years in two different ways.

One, more for psychological impact, to poison a few, to scare many. But then also in the more traditional context of weapons of mass destruction, to actually destroy lots of things and kill and harm lots of people. And this, I think, are the types of attacks that we have to be vigilant against in the future, as well.