



### Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?

By Brian Michael Jenkins

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Reviewed by

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Condoleezza Rice will be known for many firsts, including being the first African-American woman to serve as National Security Advisor and as Secretary of State. Of the many comments attributed to her in those historic roles, none may have been more memorable than the one she made about nuclear terror in the run-up to the Iraq War. When asked about chief United Nations weapons inspector Hans Blix's statement that no smoking gun had been found during inspections of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Rice said, "The problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

The comment itself, in context, is really a claim about nuclear terror and the concern that a mistake in judgment by the U.S. Government can lead to fear and tragedy. And

that notion is what Brian Jenkins's book, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* is all about—nuclear terror. Jenkins notes early that nuclear terror is distinguished from nuclear terrorism. Nuclear *terror* is about imagination or "what might be" scenarios. Nuclear *terrorism*, on the other hand, is about events. With this distinction made, the reader becomes aware that this will be a book about not just security studies, but also psychology.

The definition of *terrorism* in general is always a topic of debate. Jenkins defines it here as a core concept of "dramatic violence choreographed to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm, which causes people to exaggerate the threat" (p. 30). This violence is often effective, since our media-saturated society allows terrorists to leverage their threats into real anxiety among people. This notion is one we seem to see signs of daily. In Pakistan, with the march of a resurgent Taliban in the Swat Valley and to the outskirts of Islamabad, our biggest concern is what happens if this group gets its hands on the state's nuclear weapons. Stories of al Qaeda's search for nuclear technology and fuel from so-called rogue regimes like North Korea cause similar concern. Kim Jong-Il's threats to launch a long-range missile toward Hawaii are meant to cause fear about a possible nuclear attack on the United States. And, of course, Iran's recent threatening steps to develop nuclear weapons cause dread among both Israel and the West, with the possibility of a preemptive nuclear strike.

Nuclear terrorism, it is noted, is not a new concern. Since the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, the fear existed that malevolent actors might get their hands on

a nuclear weapon and threaten destruction and attack, and villains with nuclear weapons have become the stuff of fiction. Yet despite the multitude of articles that have been written about nuclear terrorism, an extended discussion of the topic has been nonexistent until now; Jenkins's text fills that gap. By *nuclear terrorism*, Jenkins means that there have been no instances of "the successful sabotage of an operating nuclear reactor, the deliberate release of a significant amount of radioactive material, or the detonation by terrorists of a nuclear bomb" (p. 29). In a broader sense, nuclear terrorism can be seen as comprising a spectrum of potential actions, from hoaxes by lunatics to a terrorist Hiroshima.

Jenkins explores terrorist motives and possible self-imposed constraints and what they portend in terms of coerced concessions or the simple infliction of mass destruction. He further looks at how the escalation of terrorism has propelled us as a society into an age of alarms. To determine why the American psyche seems particularly vulnerable to nuclear terror, he considers a number of potential scenarios ranging from black markets to red mercury to suitcase nukes, culminating in the possibility of al Qaeda as the world's first terrorist nuclear power. Jenkins concludes his engaging text with a scenario that allows readers to war-game the worst-case situation—terrorists going nuclear—and forces them to think about the unthinkable. What ought we to do in this kind of future?

Jenkins forces us to grapple with the uncomfortable. He wants us to get our heads around what exists in our minds about nuclear weapons and, in doing so, make sure

we can distinguish the fear from the reality. That is an important sanity check in our insecure world. While the U.S. Government is quite right to have concerns about nuclear weapons falling into terrorists' hands, those concerns need to be kept in perspective. No actual incidents of nuclear terrorism have occurred. The efforts of the United States and the other United Nations Security Council members to keep nuclear weapons away from terrorists have been successful.

The security question that lies ahead for us is really about what steps we need to take in order to ensure that continued state of affairs. Currently, we have counterproliferation efforts focused on other states. We also have some intelligence and Special Forces resources directed toward counterproliferation efforts against terrorist organizations. And we have future studies efforts looking at the evolution of terrorist organizations into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A forward-looking security strategy would take the best lessons learned from all three of these independent efforts and combine them in a narrowly focused approach to countering future terrorist organizations' efforts at nuclear terrorism. **JFQ**

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