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# The Real Weapon of Mass Destruction

Nuclear, biological and chemical warfare in the era of terrorism and “rogue” states<sup>1</sup>

*By Morten Bremer Mærli*

Paradoxically, after 50 years of mutually assured destruction (MAD), has “Weapons of Mass Destruction” – or short, WMDs – suddenly become one of the distinctive catch phrases in international security policies. Today, the United States believes that the greatest threat to international peace and stability comes from “rogue” states and transnational terrorist groups that are unrestrained in their choice of weapons and undeterred by conventional means. Saddam Hussein’s attempts to acquire so-called “weapons of mass destruction” have definitively been put on the political front burner.

According to John Bolton, U.S. Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, “terrorist groups now seek to acquire chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons any way they can. In parallel, state sponsors of terrorism are actively working to acquire weapons of mass destruction and their missile delivery systems.”<sup>2</sup>

The greatest fear of President Bush is “that terrorists will find a shortcut to

their mad ambitions when an outlaw regime supplies them with the technologies to kill on a massive scale.<sup>3</sup>

While scary scenarios indeed, the statements above forcefully not only mix the threats posed by terrorists and so-called “rogue” states. The concepts of nuclear, biological and chemical warfare are all mentioned collectively in the same breath of air and in the context of large-scale killing.

The language tends to equate “rogue” states, terrorism and “weapons of mass destruction”. The statements may thus serve well as political “appetizers” for swift (military) intervention, hereunder “preventive” (often mislabelled “pre-emptive”) wars, against evolving threats. But while the world is still awaiting evidence for alleged links between Al-Qaeda and Saddam,<sup>4</sup> such rhetoric may stand a particular risk of blurring the distinct characteristics of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. These three classes of weapons are very diverse in their technical nature and military significance.<sup>5</sup>

A collective WMD jargon is a poor starting point for understanding the respective threats these weapons pose, and perhaps more importantly, for identifying the correct countermeasures and responses during heated debates, e.g. in the U.N. Security Council. Progress in controlling each category of weapons has indeed been made more difficult by lumping biological, chemical and nuclear weapons together under the banner of WMD in the past.<sup>6</sup>

Disturbingly, this “standardization” of WMDs extends beyond pure semantics. Worrying tendencies can be seen in U.S. military planning and warfare preparations. According to the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, released December 2001, “new capabilities must be developed to defeat emerging threats such as hard and deeply buried targets (HDBT), to find and attack mobile and relocatable targets, to defeat chemical or biological agents, and to improve accuracy and limit collateral damage”.<sup>7</sup> The capabilities advertised for herein are nuclear, and the attacks could be performed against any state.

On December 11, 2002, the Bush administration issued a reminder of its policy that warns any nation using weapons of mass destruction against the United States or its allies that it will face massive retaliation, possibly including nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> In the dossier, the country’s conventional and nuclear response and defense capabilities were stressed as an important part of the posture against WMD threats. Other elements included effective in-

telligence, surveillance, interdiction, and domestic law enforcement capabilities.<sup>9</sup>

With this policy of “nukes against chem/bio”, the United States has abandoned its policy of negative security assurances, under which the U.S. was committed to never attack a non-nuclear weapon state with nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup> The security implications of such acts are likely to extend vastly beyond the (limited) horizon of U.S. war planning tables, and could impact the future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation regime as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

Both chemical and biological weapons are ruthless and non-discriminatory weapons, with grotesque consequences if successfully applied. By any means, it is therefore not the goal of this paper to downplay the risks associated with these weapons. Throughout the paper, however, it should become clear that nuclear devices are the only *real* weapon of mass destruction, with proven destructive and catastrophic effects. The threats should be dealt with accordingly, also in political discussions.

There is thus a pressing need to examine the concept of “weapons of mass destruction” and the ways we go to limit these threats in the pursuit of optimal national security. It is the aim of this brief research note to pragmatically discuss the concept, to possibly clarify its real meanings and to pave the way for sound political action. Such a paper seems particularly timely now, as the world is preparing for military actions against Iraq.

This paper does not, however, attempt to assess Iraqi nuclear, chemical or biological capabilities. Yet, in the current context it seems worth noticing that the International Atomic Energy Agency had neutralized the Iraqi nuclear program in December 1998, when the inspections came to an abrupt halt.<sup>12</sup> The agency was confident it had not missed any significant component of the Iraqi nuclear program. It seems unlikely that Iraq has been able to drastically revitalize its nuclear weapons program since the late 1990s.

#### THE WEAPONS OF “MASS DESTRUCTION” FALLACIES

Commonly, WMDs are understood as weapons capable of causing mass casualties. However, while today’s powerful conventional firepower, capable of inflicting large-scale killings, immediately challenges this type of definitions, a more pressing problem is the indiscrimination between the non-conventional weaponry within the category of “WMDs”. This becomes clear when comparing how greatly the three classes of WMDs differ with respect

to potential lethality and destructive power, and the feasibility of protection and defences.

The collective grouping of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the category of “weapons of mass destruction” more than indicates similarities between them. This assumption is primarily based on the projected death rates and the notion that the weapons will be effective, once applied. While biological weapons still have to be proven efficient on a larger scale, such weapons *could* possess lethality comparable to a single nuclear weapon.<sup>13</sup> However, the ultimate weapons of mass *destruction* are nuclear weapons, which have enormous destructive powers. The “kill expectancy” of nuclear weapons against military targets can be accurately predicted. A single modern nuclear warhead can destroy a large city, and one hundred warheads could have the capacity to destroy the United States and civilization as we know it.<sup>14</sup> In a large-scale exchange, lethal fallout could cover entire regions.

### *Biological weapons*

Biological weapons use bacteria or microorganisms harmful to humans. Examples include cholera, pest, and anthrax. Spreading bacteria or viruses by loading them into ballistic missile warheads, or by terrorism, could be difficult to counter. As biological weapons have much lower production costs than nuclear weapons, they are sometimes called “the poor man’s nuclear weapon.” But because actual attempts to use biological weapons – fortunately – so far have been few, it is hard to be sure if biological agents, like chemical weapons, really will prove more dangerous than conventional arms.<sup>15</sup> History indicates otherwise.

Biological agents are naturally occurring microorganisms (bacteria, viruses, fungi) or toxins and are therefore readily available.<sup>16</sup> But even after producing a weaponized bacteria or virus, effective dissemination of these may pose huge obstacles to the possessors. Efficient deployment of the (infectious) agents has been the challenge of biological weapons designers since the dawn of biological warfare. In fact, biological weapons were used very infrequently in the past, most likely because they did not live up to their expectations or were very impractical weapons, producing relatively few casualties against armed forces.<sup>17</sup>

The biological agents, with some notable exceptions (e.g. the hardy an-

thrax spore), are affected by changes in temperature, and the efficiency of biological attacks depends strongly on stable and favorable wind directions, and particle (aerosol) distributions. The fact that many biological agents are killed by sunlight and moisture further complicates effective delivery and dissemination.

Yet, in November 1997, then Defense Secretary William Cohen stated during a TV interview that a supply of anthrax the size of a 5-pound bag of sugar would kill half the population of Washington D.C.<sup>18</sup> However, while acquisition of nuclear, biological or chemical materials is an essential step towards weapons of mass destruction capabilities, it is not sufficient. Weaponization of the materials is essential. As nuclear materials have to be introduced into nuclear bomb assemblies, biological and chemical materials have to be made more resistant and dispersible to cause disease and death in a target population, or before they can be used to attack the food supply and/or materiel resources of a nation.

Actual experience suggests that biological weapons are both hard to make and to use. Even serious accidental releases in the past (e.g. the large release of weapons grade anthrax in Sverdlovsk in 1979) have resulted in a number of deaths that normally is to be characterized as well below levels of “mass destruction.” Incubation times allow for isolation and remedial actions, even for contagious substances. Biological weapons have, moreover, done steadily less harm in recent times, as public health infrastructure has improved.<sup>19</sup> One author thus makes the comparison that using a biological weapon is like shooting a gun at someone wearing a bullet-proof vest – the bullet is still dangerous, but there is a reasonable chance it will bounce off.<sup>20</sup>

The anthrax outbreaks in the U.S. caused widespread concern, with five dead as of November 2001 and an array of hoaxes across the world,<sup>21</sup> including Norway. The attacks in the U.S., which seem to have originated from a domestic source and remain unresolved, were all carried out with a potent (weapon-grade) strain, potentially capable of killing thousands of people if disseminated in the right fashion. But while the psychological impact was harsh and worse actions may come, the anthrax served badly as a “weapon of mass destruction.” More people were in fact killed during a *Legionella* outbreak in Stavanger, Norway, at the same period of time.<sup>22</sup>

Natural outbreaks of deceases can be mistaken for covert biological terror actions, and vice versa. But rapid detection of the causative agent and its source can be more than challenging for the responding authorities. The confusion arising after a total of six fatal human cases and the concomitant mortality in birds, caused by a virus outbreak in New York City late August and September 1999 can be an indicative lesson of uncertainty. The virus, called West Nile, had never before been seen in the Western hemisphere,<sup>23</sup> and officials are still struggling with trying to figure out if this was a deliberate attack or not.

Moreover, incubation periods after biological exposures may further complicate the epidemiological investigation. Exposure to an aerosol of anthrax spores could cause symptoms as soon as 2 days after exposure. However, illness could also develop as late as 6-8 weeks after exposure – in Sverdlovsk, one case developed 46 days after exposure.<sup>24</sup> Terrorists could take advantage of the resulting “vacuum of knowledge,” and add fuel to the flame of uncertainty by releasing threatening statements to the media, and of course, by escaping from the scene of the crime without leaving traces. However, the lack of “proof” may also undermine the biological terrorists’ intentions e.g. in situations of extortion or blackmail, and could cause less psychological impact than confirmed acts of nuclear terrorism.

As biological weapons are “silent killers,” many of them are completely inconclusive to the inherent, sudden and manifest confirmation of a serious act of violence. The effects of infectious biological materials will not become apparent until days or weeks have passed, due to the incubation period. The victims may be widely dispersed, without concentrated effects and causalities. Delayed, limited, or total lack of public attention could be the result, as for the activities of the Aum Shinrikyo. The cult made nine attacks with biological and chemical weapons before and then two attempts after the major subway incident.<sup>25</sup> Some of the attacks were lethal, but none of the attempts initially were recognized as terror incidents by the media, the public or the law enforcement authorities.

For nuclear weapons, the situation is quite different. A nuclear terrorist with access to sufficient amounts of highly enriched uranium or plutonium will have a good chance of setting off a nuclear explosion by achieving a critical mass.<sup>26</sup> The successful launching of such attacks will, moreover, not be

affected by meteorological or environmental conditions. Past experience suggests that crude HEU nuclear weapons will function without prior testing due to the low neutron background, and thus the limited risk of pre-ignitions. At least two types of nuclear weapons can be built and fielded without any kind of yield test, and the possessors could have reasonable confidence in the performance of those weapons.<sup>27</sup>

### *Chemical weapons*

Chemical weapons were used during World War I and, to a limited extent, during World War II. Iraq has used chemical weapons against both its own Kurdish population and Iran, and Egypt reportedly used chemical weapons against Yemen in the mid-1960s. Chemical weapons include nerve agents, blister agents and choking agents.<sup>28</sup>

The United States and Russia still possess their Cold War inventories of 30,000 and 40,000 tons of agents, respectively, which they are committed to destroy over the next decade at a cost of as much as \$15 to \$20 billion. But, the two former superfoes do not primarily stage destruction of these weapons because they are inhumane. Rather, the destruction is probably a result of security considerations – and the military establishments of the two nations realizing that conventional weaponry is more efficient anyway.<sup>29</sup>

According to Panofsky, a renowned physicist at Stanford University, the lethality of chemical weapons – as measured by per unit weight of delivered munitions – is lower by many orders of magnitude than it is for nuclear weapons.<sup>30</sup> Kilo by kilo, moreover, chemical weapons may even be less lethal than conventional explosives and more difficult for an attacker or a terrorist to use.<sup>31</sup> During World War I, the Germans and British expended more than one ton of gas on average to achieve a single fatality on the other side.<sup>32</sup> Fewer than one percent of the casualties during this war were caused by gas.

Like biological agents, chemical weapons are hard to use effectively because they are hard to deliver and hard to control. A 1993 study by the Office of Technology Assessment found that one ton of perfectly delivered sarin gas (the nerve gas used by the Aum Shinrikyo in Tokyo in 1995), used against unprotected civilians, could kill as many as 8,000, but that even light wind or sunlight would drop the death toll by 90 percent.<sup>33</sup> Now, of course, 800 deaths are significant, but clearly not in the range of “mass destruction”



possibly caused by a crude nuclear device. Such a device would, moreover, not depend on perfect conditions of calm air, optimal temperatures, no sunlight – and the ability to conduct repeated deliveries (spraying) over densely populated areas with very low-flying airplanes.

Saddam Hussein's own uses of chemical weapons resulted in 5,000 civilian deaths in 1988. This is the most devastating chemical attack ever. The attack was, however, performed using repeated low-level and unimpeded air raids. Regular bombs and strafing could have inflicted similar slaughter.<sup>34</sup> Besides, Saddam's fighter planes are not likely to have a similarly simple match against allied air defense. The protection (U.S.) soldiers is likely to wear during combat, could moreover make military uses of chemical weapons a completely different ball-game than one of attacking defenseless and unprotected civilians (the need for warm and impeding protective battlefield suits could be one of the reasons why the U.S. is looking at swift military actions during the winter months in the beginning of 2003).

For Saddam, it should be a consideration that in close combat – maybe as part of the urban warfare the Iraqis could be foreseeing – chemical weapons may hit back on own troops. The possible use of missile technology and artilleries may also present significant uncertainties as the impact may destroy the chemicals.

Therefore, while Saddam may possess vast quantities of chemical weapons in storages – and in a limited number of warheads, he could be facing severe constraints when trying to utilize these, one way or another.

## CONCLUSION

Any successful use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapon will have devastating consequences. As of today, however, nuclear weapons are the only “weapons of mass destruction” – and weapons that have proven to live up to their name and reputation.

The destructive powers of nuclear weapons remain uncontested. The effects of a nuclear blast will be massive, immediate and devastating – and of course widely publicized. While chemical and biological weapons have yet to be proven efficient for causing mass casualties, there is no defence against the thermal effects, pressure, and radiation near the detonation of a nuclear weapon. Unlike chemical weapons, there is no question about where the wind will take it and/or dissolve it. Unlike biological weapons, there is no

gradual sickening – and thus an opportunity for lifesaving – of victims.

However, despite these significant differences, in discussions about international terrorism or “rogue” states as Iraq there is an ever-increasing tendency to lump chemical, biological and nuclear warfare under the same rubric of “weapons of mass destruction.” Endlessly referring to “WMDs” in this way can only distract us from focusing on the one weapon that we can be sure can cause widespread havoc.

It could also lower the threshold against the uses of nuclear weapons, as these weapons for the first time ever now not only are rhetorically but also militarily equated with biological and chemical weapons by the Bush administration. This violates long-standing principles of nuclear weapons as weapons of deterrence, to use nuclear weapons only as last resort – and finally, newer to use them against non-nuclear weapon states.

The current and probably well-calculated semantic convergence of quite distinctive types of so-call “weapons of mass destruction” may seem like an attractive rhetorical tool for political mobilization and action. However, inclusion of the often less effective biological and chemical weapons in the “WMD” group blurs the distinctions between the weapons, their effects, and consequently our understanding of the threats and how to meet these. A clear and accurate understanding of the threat is a fundamental basis for sound political action.

This blurring may, moreover, delude leading nuclear weapons states onto a slippery slope, eventually breaking long-standing nuclear taboos. Accordingly, the phrase “weapons of mass destruction” should be avoided.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This research note draws upon my paper “Relearning the ABCs: Terrorists and ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’”, published in the *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, Summer 2000. In addition, Wolfgang K.H. “Pief” Panofsky and Gregg Easterbrook provided massive inspiration through their articles “Dismantling the Concept of ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’” and “Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of ‘WMD’”, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> John R. Bolton, U.S. Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, “The International Aspects of Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction”, Remarks to the Second Global Conference on Nuclear, Bio/Chem Terrorism: Mitigation and Response, The Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C., November 1, 2002 <http://www.state.gov/t/us/rm/14848pf.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Bolton. See footnote above.

<sup>4</sup> News report about a “credible report that Islamic extremists affiliated with al Qaeda took possession of a chemical weapon in Iraq last month or late in October” surfaced in mid

December. However, like most intelligence, the reported chemical weapon transfer is not backed by definitive evidence. Barton Gellman, "U.S. Suspects Al Qaeda Got Nerve Agent From Iraqis", *Washington Post*, December 12, 2002; Page A01, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A42876-2002Dec11.html>

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang K.H. Panofsky, "Dismantling the Concept of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'", *Arms Control Today*, April 1999. [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998\\_04/wkhp98.asp](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998_04/wkhp98.asp)

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang K.H. Panofsky, "Dismantling the Concept of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'", *Arms Control Today*, April 1999. [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998\\_04/wkhp98.asp](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998_04/wkhp98.asp). The legal status of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons is quite different. Through the Biological and Chemical Weapon Conventions, the international community has banned such weapons. While the International Court of Justice affirmed in 1996 that there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith, an international convention to prohibit the development, testing, production, stockpiling, transfer, use or threat of use of nuclear weapons, however, remains to materialize.

The principal legal tool designed to limit nuclear weapons proliferation is the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which in 1995 was indefinitely extended by states-parties. The NPT seals a complex bargain: the nuclear-weapon states agree not to transfer nuclear weapons and their materials to non-nuclear-weapon states, which agree not to receive or manufacture them. The lack of willingness by the nuclear weapons states to fulfill their unequivocal obligation to disarm and to eliminate their nuclear weapons has put a lot of strain on the treaty. Its future as a relevant arms control tool is thus uncertain.

<sup>7</sup> From the Nuclear Posture Review [Excerpts], Submitted to Congress on December 31, 2001, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>

<sup>8</sup> CNN, "U.S. warns potential enemies: Retaliation could include nukes", December 11, 2002, <http://www.cnn.com/2002/US/12/11/bush.weapons.security/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> U.S. "National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction", December 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/12/WMDStrategy.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> For long, the U.S. has long maintained a policy of nuclear ambiguity, where (earlier on) all states attacking the U.S. with biological or chemical weapons would face the gravest consequences and "all possible means" (without specifically referring to nuclear weapons).

<sup>11</sup> For more on this, see Security Council resolution 984 (1995) on security assurances against the use of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear-weapon states that are parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

<sup>12</sup> Remarks by Director General Mohamed ElBaradei, International Atomic Energy Agency, at the Carnegie International Non-Proliferation Conference, Washington D.C., November 14-15, 2002, <http://www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/pdf/conference/speeches/Elbaradei.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Morten Bremer Maerli, "Relearning the ABCs: Terrorists and 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'", *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, Summer 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Steve Fetter, "The Future of Nuclear Arms Control," *Physics and Society*, (October 1998), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, "Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of 'WMD'", *The New Republic*, October 7, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. from soil samples and infected rodents. In addition to naturally occurring organisms, genetically modified organisms may be used as biological agents in the future.

<sup>17</sup> David Rapoport, "Terrorism and the Weapons of the Apocalypse", *National Security Studies Quarterly*, no. 5, Summer 1999, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> The media stunt was widely criticized. See e.g. Jonathan B. Tucker and Amy Sands, "An unlikely threat," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August 1999, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, "Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of 'WMD'", *The New Re-*

public, October 7, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, "Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of 'WMD'", *The New Republic*, October 7, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Status as of November 23, 2001, as reported by the WHO: 5 deaths associated with inhalational anthrax among the 23 cases, <http://www.who.int/disease-outbreak-news/n2001/november/23november2001.html>

<sup>22</sup> Seven out of 28 affected people died during this outbreak.

<sup>23</sup> R. S. Lanciotti et al. "Origin of the West Nile Virus Responsible for an Outbreak of Encephalitis in the Northeastern United States", *Science* 286, December 17, 1999, pp. 2333-2337.

<sup>24</sup> Center for Civilian Biodefense Strategies, "Anthrax Fact Sheet", 1999, <http://www.hopkins-biodefense.org/pages/agents/agentanthrax.html>

<sup>25</sup> David Rapoport, "Terrorism and the Weapons of the Apocalypse", *National Security Studies Quarterly*, no. 5, Summer 1999, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> Morten Bremer Maerli, "Relearning the ABCs: Terrorists and 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'", *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, Summer 2000.

<sup>27</sup> *Military Critical Technologies, Part II: Weapons of Mass Destruction Technologies*, 1997, p. II-5-1.

<sup>28</sup> For a summary of chemical warfare agents, see <http://www.fas.org/nuke/intro/cw/agent.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, "Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of 'WMD'", *The New Republic*, October 7, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Wolfgang K.H. Panofsky, "Dismantling the Concept of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'", *Arms Control Today*, April 1999. [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998\\_04/wkhp98.asp](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998_04/wkhp98.asp)

<sup>31</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, "Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of 'WMD'", *The New Republic*, October 7, 2002, p.

<sup>32</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, "Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of 'WMD'", *The New Republic*, October 7, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Study quoted in Gregg Easterbrook, "Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of 'WMD'", *The New Republic*, October 7, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, "Term Limits. The Meaninglessness of 'WMD'", *The New Republic*, October 7, 2002, p. 23.

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