



Daesh Hype about Stealing Nuclear Weapons

By David Albright and Sarah Burkhard

October 2, 2015

With Daesh¹ entrenched in Syria and Iraq and growing in influence in North Africa and Pakistan, the risk is likely to grow that the terrorist group or one of its allies will seek nuclear weapons. Or at least this is what they want the world to think since their publications imply these intentions. But Daesh's public claims of ways to accomplish that goal are unfounded and mainly seem intended to simply incite fear.

At ISIS, we assess that the risk of Daesh acquiring nuclear weapons is low. However, that characterization needs to be carefully considered. The chance of Daesh acquiring a nuclear weapon, either through theft of a functioning nuclear weapon, or of nuclear explosive material followed by the manufacturing of a crude nuclear explosive, is assessed as low, similar to the risk of a major nuclear reactor accident, such as the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters. However, although the chance of Daesh stealing a nuclear weapon is low, the consequences would be horrible and extraordinary efforts need to be waged to ensure that the risk becomes even lower. A nuclear explosive going off in a major city would have catastrophic consequences, probably far worse than those of Chernobyl or Fukushima.

While the threat of Daesh stealing or otherwise acquiring a nuclear weapon needs to be taken seriously, Daesh writings on the subject should be discounted. In a May 2015 article in the Daesh magazine *Dabiq*, the British journalist John Cantlie warns of Daesh's rapid global expansion and its capabilities to launch major terroristic attacks – including acquiring a nuclear weapon and smuggling it into the United States. It is uncertain if Cantlie actually penned the article, titled "The Perfect Storm." However, the sentiments of the piece likely reflect Daesh ambitions. According to the article:

Let me throw a hypothetical operation onto the table. The Islamic State has billions of dollars in the bank, so they call on their wilāyah in Pakistan to purchase a nuclear device through weapons dealers with links to corrupt officials in the region. The weapon is then

¹ For obvious reasons we do not refer to the terrorist group as ISIS. We find the use of ISIS for the terrorist group offensive, given the good, historical connotation of the name Isis and the many organizations negatively impacted by its use. We would urge others to halt the use of "ISIS" when referring to the terrorist organization. We increasingly favor Daesh.

transported overland until it makes it to Libya, where the mujāhidīn move it south to Nigeria.

Drug shipments from Columbia bound for Europe pass through West Africa, so moving other types of contraband from East to West is just as possible. The nuke and accompanying mujāhidīn arrive on the shorelines of South America and are transported through the porous borders of Central America before arriving in Mexico and up to the border with the United States. From there it's just a quick hop through a smuggling tunnel and hey presto, they're mingling with another 12 million "illegal" aliens in America with a nuclear bomb in the trunk of their car.

The scenario is indeed frightening but highly unlikely for many reasons. Stealing a nuclear weapon in Pakistan would be extraordinarily difficult. Moreover, if such a weapon were stolen in Pakistan, that theft would likely be detected, leading to a massive worldwide hunt for it and the perpetrators. Under these conditions, getting the weapon out of Pakistan and transporting it through Africa to the Americas, and finally into the United States, would be extraordinarily difficult. Detection and interdiction would almost certainly be assured before it reached its target in the United States. However, if the theft were not detected, would the authorities discover and seize the bomb in time? Likely, but that outcome is not as assured. Nuclear weapons can be notoriously difficult to detect during shipment if authorities are not on heightened alert. As a result, the priority remains ensuring that the theft of functioning nuclear weapons is practically impossible and that, in the chance that one is stolen, its theft is rapidly discovered and resources are quickly deployed to get it back before it is detonated. All the major nations of the world have agreed on those goals and are working to make sure they are achieved.

In conclusion, the threat of Daesh seeking nuclear weapons must be taken seriously, and countries need to constantly improve their nuclear security over nuclear weapons and nuclear explosive materials, both against external and insider threats. Moreover, the threat of Daesh acquiring radiological materials that it could use as a terrorist weapon deserves special concern, scrutiny, and further remediation. However, the chance of Daesh stealing a nuclear weapon is currently very low. Daesh's public boasts and fantasies about its easy pathways to nuclear weapons should be dismissed.