

## The Threat of Nuclear Terrorism Is Real

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*Intelligence reveals that terrorists want access to nuclear weapons, and appalling worldwide nuclear security measures make it plausible that terrorists could gain access to the materials needed to build them. The theft of highly enriched uranium, the material used in nuclear bombs, is not fiction, but reality. If terrorists were to use stolen materials to set off a bomb, millions would be killed and the economic and political fallout would be devastating. While no terrorists are currently known to have a nuclear weapon, efforts to improve security of nuclear materials will go a long way to prevent the disastrous risks of their ever obtaining them.*

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Several basic questions can give us an understanding of the risk of nuclear terrorism.

## The Bad News

*Do terrorists want nuclear weapons?* For a small set of terrorists, the answer is clearly “yes.” Osama bin Laden has called the acquisition of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction a “religious duty.” Al Qaeda operatives have made repeated attempts to buy nuclear material for a nuclear bomb, or to recruit nuclear expertise—including the two extremist Pakistani nuclear weapon scientists who met with bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri to discuss nuclear weapons. Before al Qaeda, the Japanese terror cult Aum Shinrikyo also made a concerted effort to get nuclear weapons. With at least two groups going down this path in the last 15 years, we must expect that others will in the future.

*Is it plausible that a sophisticated terrorist group could make a crude nuclear bomb if they got HEU [highly enriched uranium] or separated plutonium?* The answer here is also “yes.” Making at least a crude nuclear bomb might well be within the capabilities of a sophisticated group, though a nuclear bomb effort would be the most technically challenging operation any terrorist group has ever accomplished. One study by the now-defunct congressional Office of Technology Assessment summarized the threat: “A small group of people, none of whom have ever had access to the classified literature, could possibly design and build a crude nuclear explosive device . . . Only modest machine-shop facilities that could be contracted for without arousing suspicion would be required.” Indeed, even before the revelations from Afghanistan, U.S. intelligence concluded that “fabrication of at least a ‘crude’ nuclear device was within al-Qa’ida’s capabilities, if it could obtain fissile material.”