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Challenging the Monolith, An Analysis of Presumptions Surrounding Nuclear Terrorism Through an Examination of Four Distinct Cases

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Challenging the Monolith
An Analysis of Presumptions Surrounding Nuclear Terrorism
Through an Examination of Four Distinct Cases

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Part One

Introduction

In this paper, I will analyze why terrorist groups want to “go” nuclear, what motivates these nuclear desires, and I will consider how terrorists are likely to act if they were to acquire a nuclear weapon. I argue that the common perception of the threat posed by nuclear terrorism is misguided on several levels and that the disproportionate focus on Islamic Extremism is unreasonable and irresponsible.

Terrorists are rational and strategic actors. Terrorism is inherently political and is a means to an end. Nuclear weapons are strategically symbolic not objects of strategic defense in the conventional sense, although the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons are unimaginable. States want nuclear weapons because of the power they hold, the image they portray, and for deterrence. Terrorist groups want them for mostly the same reasons, especially ones who want to establish a state, as they mimic state behavior. Destructive capabilities aside, nuclear weapons almost guarantee power and influence in global politics and protect territorial sovereignty. Both of those things are exclusively reserved for states, and they would like to keep it that way. Islamic extremist groups like al-Qaeda and Daesh have been the central concern shaping efforts to counter nuclear terrorism. This almost exclusive focus on Islamic extremist groups has resulted in an insufficient approach, as it has allowed other groups, like AWD, to fly under the radar.

The way that terrorism, as a phenomenon, is understood is constantly changing. There isn't a definition that adequately represents all of the layers of terrorism, making it almost impossible to point to what distinguishes terrorism from other forms of political violence. Despite the apparent absence of a concrete definition, most people have a vague idea or

impression of what terrorism is but lack a more precise, concrete, and truly explanatory definition of the word.¹ For the purpose of this paper, I will frame terrorism around Lionel McPherson's understanding, which is the deliberate use of force against ordinary non-combatants, which can be expected to cause broader fear among them for political ends.²

Beyond their destructive capabilities, nuclear weapons are highly strategic. They are the ultimate symbol of power, and the prospect of a nuclear weapon falling into the hands of the wrong people is horrifying. In the wake of 9/11, the United States went to great lengths to prevent future attacks. Two decades after the launch of the Global War on Terrorism, there is a looming fear of another large-scale terrorist attack. So it is understandable that the threat of a terrorist group detonating a nuclear weapon is considered to be one of the foremost security threats today.

Despite increased surveillance monitoring and counterterrorism activities, it seems that it is getting easier and easier to acquire or build a nuclear weapon. If a terrorist group went nuclear, it would fundamentally change the state system. In all contexts, nuclear proliferation is a major global security concern, and when this proliferation involves non-state groups, it becomes more concerning. States see proliferation as a threat because there is a fear that the more actors with nuclear capabilities, the more likely it is that a nuclear device will be detonated,³ sovereignty will be infringed upon, and the international system will be destabilized.

If a terrorist group were to acquire a nuclear weapon, it is unlikely they would be detonated, as it would be counterproductive and illogical. Detonation is not out of the question

¹Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1.

² Lionel K. McPherson, "Is Terrorism Distinctively Wrong?," *Ethics* 117, no. 3 (2007): 525, <https://doi.org/10.1086/512781>.

³ Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539273>.

entirely, but it just does not make sense rationally or strategically. The opportunity cost and group survival are reason enough to refrain from detonating the weapon.

In this paper, I argue that the monolithic view of nuclear terrorism is flawed. This fundamental error is a product of the acquisition-use presumption. I analyze why a variety of terrorist groups want to “go” nuclear, what motivates these nuclear desires, and consider how terrorists are likely to act if they were to acquire a nuclear weapon. I argue that the common perception of the threat posed by nuclear terrorism is misguided on several levels, and that the disproportionate focus on Islamic extremism is unreasonable and irresponsible. The foundations of this thesis are built upon several assumptions. Terrorists are rational and strategic actors. Terrorism is inherently political, and is a means to an end. Nuclear weapons are not conventionally defensive, they are instead objects of strategic symbolism.

Case Studies

In my analysis of why terrorist groups want to “go” nuclear, I focus on four specific groups, al-Qaeda, Daesh,⁴ Atomwaffen Division (AWD), and Aum Shinrikyo. Although the focus of this paper is on non-state groups, states are useful as case studies for the realities of nuclear proliferation. This paper will offer two case studies, one looking at France and the other looking at the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). To date, no terrorist group has gone nuclear, so states are the only cases available for looking at nuclear proliferation and acquisition.

⁴ I will refer to the Islamic State as Daesh. The official name for the Islamic State in arabic is “al-Dawlah al-Islamīyah fī al-‘Irāq wa-al-Shām”, translating to the Islamic state in Iraq and al-Sham (the Levant), and Daesh is the acronym of this official name. Labeling the group as ISIS, ISIL or IS not only legitimizes the group as a state, and as Islamic, but it also has some challenges in the distinction between ISIS and ISIL, they refer to the same region, "al-Sham," (the Levant which includes Syria). Therefore, this paper will be referring to this group as Daesh, rather than the Islamic State.

In order to demonstrate the unorthodox utility that comes from nuclear proliferation and the procurement of nuclear weapons, I will examine the French nuclear program. I will discuss what the motivations are for states to “go” nuclear if not for the purpose of strategic defense. I will also question if a state can justify prioritizing this kind of project over basic state responsibilities and programs. The French case exposes how irresponsible nuclear proliferation can be and it undercuts the notion that nuclear weapons are objects of strategic defense. Whereas the case of the DPRK demonstrates the power that comes from the development and possession of nuclear weapons. I will consider the initial motivations compared to the eventual outcomes of establishing a nuclear program, discuss the consequences of this decision for the DPRK, and consider what that means for terrorist groups with nuclear desires.

Key Understandings of Definitions and Theoretical Framework

Definitions

Terrorism

The way that terrorism is understood is always changing, and to every definition there are exceptions. As a phenomenon, terrorism is incredibly difficult to pinpoint. There isn't a definition that adequately represents a concept as complex as terrorism, making it almost impossible to point to what distinguishes terrorism from other forms of political violence. Despite the apparent absence of a concrete definition of terrorism, most people have a vague idea or impression of what terrorism is but lack a more precise, concrete, and truly explanatory definition of the word.⁵ The intentional harm to the innocent, primarily non-combatants, in the pursuit of a political goal is the hallmark of terrorism. This paper frames terrorism as the

⁵ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 1.

deliberate use of force against ordinary noncombatants, which can be expected to cause wider fear among them, for political ends.⁶

The dominant view of terrorism is that it is blatantly wrong, and comparable to murder. War on the other hand is usually understood to be necessary and a form of legitimate violence when carried out by a state. Generally, war is understood to be justified, and terrorism unjustified and illegitimate. However, when compared with terrorism, war can be morally worse. The idea of a moral boundary between terrorism and war is complicated by Just War Theory. Terrorism and war can both be justified, but when considering Just War Theory and the strategies of states and those of terror groups, it becomes clear that terrorism is not necessarily worse than war.⁷ The legitimacy of violence is of course subjective, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Terrorism is strategic in nature and while it is generally regarded as illegitimate violence in the public imagination, when compared to conventional war, terrorism is not distinctively wrong.

Nuclear Weapons

Nuclear weapons are strategic. They offer nuclear deterrence, and national security which comes from the "awesome power" of nuclear weapons.⁸ States who have nuclear weapons are part of an elite club, which distinguishes those who have them from those who do not. The Great Powers have sophisticated nuclear programs, and as a result, have greater global influence.

Nuclear weapons are political objects of considerable importance in domestic debates and internal bureaucratic struggles and can also serve as international normative symbols of

⁶ McPherson, "Is Terrorism," 525.

⁷ Virginia Held, "Terrorism and War," *The Journal of Ethics* 8, no. 1 (2004) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25115781>.

⁸ Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate*. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton &, (2013), 34.

modernity and identity.⁹ Despite the unconventional means of security nuclear weapons offer, they are the ultimate source of security for the elite group of states who have them.

Above all else, nuclear weapons are symbolic of status and are developed to symbolize state power, modernity, legitimacy as well as project a perceived national identity. With this nuanced understanding, nuclear acquisition seems to be a dead-end, defense wise. After all, if nuclear weapons are not for strategic defense, then why do states go to such great lengths to “go” nuclear? And why would a terrorist group risk survival for this status?

William Epstein, former Director of the UN Disarmament Division, discusses the divergent incentives and disincentives considered when states decide whether or not to go nuclear in his article “Why States Go -- And Don't Go -- Nuclear.” He argues that the reasons states decide to go nuclear are different for each state, arguing that it is generally a combination of military, political, and economic concerns and motivations. Epstein explains that states see nuclear weapons as a way to promote their security, enhance their prestige, augment their influence, and improve their economic condition.¹⁰ While Epstein’s argument is centered around states it is applicable to non-states as well.

Theoretical Framework and Assumptions

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is integral when looking at the role that nuclear weapons play in shaping state identity. SIT explains how individual identity is shaped by membership in a

⁹ Sagan, "Why Do States," 55.

¹⁰ William Epstein, "Why States Go -- and Don't Go -- Nuclear," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 430 (1977): 17, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1042354>.

particular social group.¹¹ This theory proposes that if a state experiences a decline in status, the state will engage in strategies of identity management. Specifically, strategies that relate to competition and mobility as a means to reverse this perceived decline. Therefore, based on the assumptions of social mobility strategy, states participate in social assimilation strategy in order to improve their status. Through these assimilation efforts, the group of perceived lesser status attempts to replicate the characteristics associated with the group of higher status. Essentially, dress for the job you want, not the job you have.

Tina Fey's *Mean Girls* is an incredible example of this theory. The film closely depicts how social capital can be replicated to raise the social status of less popular people. Here, less popular people strive to assimilate by adopting physical attributes and behaviors displayed by the Plastics (a group of extremely popular yet superficial high school girls who dictate the social hierarchy at their school). In this scenario where the nuclear club is the Plastics, Regina George is the United States, Cady Heron could be al-Qaeda or DPRK, and Gretchen Wieners, a member of the Plastics who only wants Regina's acceptance, might be Israel. In other words, if a state wants to be part of a group, they mimic the behavior of the members of that group in order to assimilate and fit in.

In *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*, Michelle Murray discusses recognition and the problem of social uncertainty. Proposing that state identity formation depends unavoidably on recognition,¹² maintaining that a state's social status is always the socially constructed political *effect* of its interactions. These interactions with other states shape state identity as they either confirm or contradict how the state's self image. Murray explains that

¹¹ Saul McLeod, "Social Identity Theory." Simply Psychology. January 01, 1970.
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html>.

¹² Michelle K. Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 46.

this “inherently social process of identity formation presents states with a problem: states can never discern beforehand the recognition responses of other states and as a result can never be certain about the future security of their social identity,”¹³ affirming that their social identity is crucial to their survival as political actors. In this way, nuclear programs are a security mechanism for state identity. Nuclear programs operate as a mechanism for legitimacy and as an essential element to their survival as modern states. It becomes clear then that states arm themselves not because weapons perform a particular security function—they are effectively useless as instruments of national defense—but rather because such practices are constitutively linked to the maintenance of sovereignty and state identity.¹⁴

SIT explains how individual identity is shaped by membership in a particular social group.¹⁵ This understanding must be taken into account when considering the role that nuclear weapons play in shaping state identity, and examined when analyzing the nuclear desires of terrorist groups. Based on these assumptions, states participate in social assimilation strategy in order to improve their status. Patterns of social assimilation are present in the behavior of terrorist groups as well, making SIT applicable to non-state groups too.

Proportionality principle

Historically, simply killing a lot of people has seldom been an objective of terrorists. Instead of wholesale bloodshed, “terrorists operate on the principle of the minimum force necessary.”¹⁶ Terrorists “find it unnecessary to kill many, as long as killing a few is sufficient for their purposes.”¹⁷ The proportionality of means is important to terrorist groups when planning an

¹³ Murray, *The Struggle*, 46.

¹⁴ Murray, *The Struggle*, 51.

¹⁵ McLeod, "Social Identity"

¹⁶ Brian Michael Jenkins. “The Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism” (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, P-7119, July 1985), 6.

¹⁷ Jenkins, “The Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism” 6.

attack. Terrorists believe that only if their violence is calculated or regulated will they be able to obtain the popular support or international recognition they crave, or achieve the political ends that they desire. It is for this reason that if a non-state group were to go nuclear, they would not carry out mass casualty attacks, simply because there is little reason for them to kill a large number of people when the death of a handful can be just as impactful.

In the case of nuclear weapons, this logic is taken further with the argument that there are few realistic demands that terrorists can make by threatening the use of such indiscriminate weapons and little that they can accomplish by using them that they could not achieve otherwise. In other words, the terrorists' aims and objectives could just as easily be realized through less extreme measures than the detonation of a nuclear device. Walter Laqueur articulates this idea simply, "it can be taken for granted that most of the terrorist groups existing at present will not use weapons of mass destruction, either as a matter of political principle or because it would defeat their purpose."¹⁸

Deterrence Theory

Deterrence theory is central to the value of nuclear weapons. Regardless of whether or not one believes that deterrence is responsible for the long peace, it is largely uncontested that deterrence is at the heart of nuclear strategy and proliferation. In essence, deterrence is a strategy intended to dissuade an adversary from taking action by the threat of reprisal, or to prevent it from doing something that another state desires.¹⁹ In the simplest terms, nuclear deterrence is the idea that if one state has a nuclear weapon, they are able to deter their adversaries.

¹⁸ Jenkins, "The Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism" 31.

¹⁹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Deterrence." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 12, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/deterrence-political-and-military-strategy>.

Nuclear weapons make the cost of war too high, which according to this theory results in peace, or at least non-war. Deterrence depends on the capacity to actively deny an opponent victory,²⁰ which is central to why al-Qaeda has an interest in nuclear acquisition. States, or non-states for that matter, who have nuclear weapons are not attractive targets because the risk of mutually assured destruction is a clear and present danger.

Accelerationism

Accelerationism, in political theory, is the idea that the proliferation of capitalism should be accelerated. However, there are several alternative understandings of this idea, and for the purpose of this paper when accelerationism is referenced, it will be in reference to the white nationalist understanding. This understanding of the idea refers to the acceleration of conflict along racial lines by way of terrorism. The use of terror is an intentional choice, which is utilized as a way to prompt a societal collapse that will allow for the establishment of a white ethnostate. Essentially, when used in this context, accelerationism as a framework is something of a golden ticket for white supremacists who are determined to make society as we know it collapse.²¹ In this paper, accelerationism is relevant to both Atomwaffen Division and Aum Shinrikyo.

The acquisition-use presumption

Deconstructing and challenging the acquisition-use presumption is central to understanding the value of nuclear weapons for non-state groups. Outlined by McIntosh and Storey, this is the presumption that once a nuclear weapon is acquired by a group, they will use it right away. This presumption overestimates the likelihood of an attack, which results in a limited

²⁰ Michael C. Williams, "Rethinking the 'Logic' of Deterrence," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 17, no. 1 (1992): 76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40644732>.

²¹ Anti-Defamation League, "White Supremacists Embrace 'Accelerationism,'" *Extremism, Terrorism & Bigotry* (blog), entry posted April 16, 2019, <https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacists-embrace-accelerationism>.

scope of literature surrounding nuclear terrorism. Unfortunately, scholarship is increasingly focused on whether a terrorist group can acquire a weapon, failing to consider what it would be used for upon acquisition. In recognizing the shortcomings of this presumption, McIntosh and Storey offer an alternative approach that “identifies and differentiates the strategic ‘opportunities’ available to terrorist groups once armed with an operational nuclear device.”²² This mode of analysis demonstrates that the threat of a nuclear attack is “much less likely than typically proposed, even assuming the likelihood of nuclear acquisition.”²³ Their alternative approach is critical to this analysis, as it brilliantly offers a new point of view and fundamentally changes how the threat is understood in a normative sense.

²² Christopher McIntosh and Ian Storey, "Between Acquisition and Use: Assessing the Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (June 2018): 4.

²³ McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 4.

Part Two

Utility of Nuclear Weapons

What are nuclear weapons for?

What are nuclear weapons? What are they used for and why are they so strongly desired by states, and non-states? What's the point if they are never even used? Nuclear weapons are strategic, we know that. Beyond them being strategic though, the answer can get amazingly complicated. They are strategic weapons yes, but they are not instruments of defense in the conventional sense, instead nuclear weapons act as instruments of strategic symbolism and are used to project identity. They offer nuclear deterrence, and national security which comes from their "awesome power."²⁴ They also offer entry into an elite club, which distinguishes those who have them from those who do not. The Great Powers have sophisticated nuclear programs, and as a result, have greater global influence.

If nuclear weapons are not for strategic defense, then why do states go to such great lengths to "go" nuclear? Sagan proposes three primary models explaining the incentives of nuclear acquisition. First, the security or realist, model, which argues that states build weapons for security and because others do; Second, a "domestic politics" model, which sees nuclear weapons development as the outcome of actions by powerful coalitions within states that seek institutional power via this end; and, finally, a "norms" model, which argues that "weapons acquisition, or restraint in weapons development, provides an important normative symbol of the state's modernity and identity."²⁵

²⁴ Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread*, 34.

²⁵ Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 73–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539273>.

As history demonstrates, nuclear weapons do not operate as traditional means of security, as their source of security lays in their unuse.²⁶ However, despite the unconventional means of security nuclear weapons offer, they are nevertheless the ultimate source of security for the elite group of states who have them. Nuclear weapons, like other weapons, are more than tools of national security; they are political objects of considerable importance in domestic debates and internal bureaucratic struggles and can also serve as international normative symbols of modernity and identity.²⁷

It is undeniable that nuclear weapons are a source of national security, however, the means by which security is established is wholly unlike the methods that conventional weapons utilized in the past. The source of security centers around identity. Rather than relying on the normative defense mechanisms offered by conventional weapons, nuclear weapons act as emblems of full sovereign status for states.²⁸ Accordingly, nuclear programs, civilian and military, are an essential element of sovereign status. The significance these weapons have is a result of their existence as value-laden “icons,” within a highly structured international normative order. Suchman and Eyre argue that “beyond their strategic potential, technologically sophisticated militaries have come to symbolize modernity, efficacy, and independence.”²⁹ This assertion positions the strategic potential of nuclear weapons to be on the same plane as their symbolic function.

Nuclear proliferation is a political compulsion, in a similar way that flags act as emblems of a sovereign state, so do these kinds of weapons.³⁰ Much like flags, nuclear weapons are

²⁶ Murray, Michelle. "Deconstructing Nuclear Deterrence I: Nuclear Deterrence as Discourse" Lecture, Nuclear Proliferation 326. Bard College, NY, February 11, 2019.

²⁷ Scott D. Sagan, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security* 21 (Winter 1996/97): 55.

²⁸ Mark C. Suchman, and Dana P. Eyre. "Military Procurement as Rational Myth: Notes on the Social Construction of Weapons Proliferation." *Sociological Forum* 7, no. 1 (1992): 139.

²⁹ Suchman and Eyre. "Military Procurement," 139.

³⁰ Suchman and Eyre. "Military Procurement," 139.

essentially an item on a checklist that states are prompted to complete. The completion of this checklist indicates that the state has all of the elements deemed essential to being considered modern. Itty Abraham posits that states arm not because weapons perform a particular security function—they are effectively useless as instruments of national defense—but rather because such practices are constitutively linked to the maintenance of sovereignty and state identity. He explains that “becoming a state necessitates that others recognize you as such, and this is accomplished in part through conformity to a ritualized set of material practices.”³¹ Further establishing that in order to be a state it must have a modern military, nuclear weapons are a prerequisite for being a powerful state. This understanding, paired with social identity theory, allows for nuclear proliferation to be more straightforward and logical.

The moment states “go” nuclear marks an extraordinary moment for not only that state but for the international community as well. It is a techno-political event on a mass-scale, involving the planning of an explosive release of nuclear energy. Abraham describes this as the unambiguous moment a country has crossed over a particular set of political and technological boundaries.³² Most directly, the institutional argument suggests that states procure arms simply because such actions are an inherent part of the “independent,” “modern” nation-state. This is simply to say that states pursue nuclear weapons because that is what states are supposed to do. Again demonstrating that nuclear proliferation is a political compulsion, because “to be recognized as possessing a ‘full degree of statehood’ a country must...be capable of maintaining its territorial integrity and political independence.”³³ The consequence of this argument is that nation-states are “born arming.” Regardless of the nation’s “need” for a robust military, when

³¹ Itty Abraham, "The Ambivalence of Nuclear Histories," *Osiris* 21, no. 1 (2006): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1086/507135>.

³² Abraham, "The Ambivalence," 51.

³³ Suchman and Eyre. "Military Procurement," 150.

nations are born arming, the top priority is the military, regardless of whether or not such organizations are imperative to the state.³⁴

This view reaffirms nuclear weaponry as one of the essential elements of sovereign status. The Indian nuclear program is an excellent example of this. For India, nuclear weapons were the ultimate source of security, but not for defense. The legitimizing value offered by nuclear weapons was ultimately more important than objects of defense. It was necessary for India's security. In the Indian case for example, atomic energy was the necessary means for preventing recolonization and setting newly gained independence on a solid foundation.³⁵ For Nehru, the central political problem, post independence, was to be taken seriously on the international stage: *to create political legitimacy for the postcolonial state*.³⁶ Nuclear proliferation was the ultimate solution.

“Nuclear Club” Identity

As military sophistication comes to signify a commitment to modernity, the pressure to procure advanced hardware becomes virtually irresistible. However, despite the irresistibility even highly institutionalized organizational forms often begin as rational responses to functional, technological, or political pressures.³⁷ Sociologist Mark C. Suchman and analyst Dana P. Eyre argue that if we instead take weapons seriously not only as tools of destruction but also as sacred symbols, we may gain a better understanding of the role of war in our worldview and of the role of the warrior in our cultural ethos. Ultimately, they suggest that we may find that to prevent the

³⁴A. F. Mullins, *Born Arming: Development and Military Power in New States*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.

³⁵ Abraham, "The Ambivalence," 62.

³⁶ Abraham, "The Ambivalence," 62.

³⁷ Suchman and Eyre. "Military Procurement," 155.

irrationality of armed conflict we must first understand the nonrational meanings that we have constructed for our acts of arming and for our armaments themselves.³⁸

Nuclear programs, for civil and defense purposes, are effective means for state advancement. Suchman and Eyre discuss the utility of military advancement as being valuable both practically and politically in their article “Military Procurement as Rational Myth”. In contrast to more traditional arguments, which view the proliferation of objects of national security as the result of rational security decisions, Suchman, and Eyre emphasize their significance as value-laden icons within a highly structured international normative order. They argue that beyond their strategic potential, technologically sophisticated militaries have come to be the dominant symbol of modernity and independence. Saying that, “[e]ven in the absence of actual or potential interstate conflict, the possession of arms often constitutes a significant part of the military's power, particularly in systems where coups are a prominent feature of the political process.”³⁹

Beyond this, the military may seek these materialized structures not only as a route to power but also as an end in itself. Therefore, military procurement reflects broader efforts to consolidate state power.⁴⁰ Nuclear programs are a means to state advancement. It should come as no surprise that the periods of dramatic structural improvement in the United States coincide with moments of intense fear. Considering the social effects of Cold War fears in his article *Nuclear Pasts, Nuclear Futures*, Joseph Masco writes “It is no coincidence that the era of the most intense Cold War nuclear fears was also the era that built infrastructures, created the terms of international regulations over dangerous technologies, invested in higher education as well as

³⁸ Suchman and Eyre. “Military Procurement,” 157.

³⁹ Elting Elmore Morison. *Men, Machines, and Modern times*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.

⁴⁰ Suchman and Eyre. “Military Procurement,” 144.

science and engineering, and created the first round of environmental laws.”⁴¹ These periods of state advancement are spurred by the anxiety of becoming inferior, and these measures attempt to curtail that fear.

Case Studies

This set of case studies looks at how nuclear weapons are used and what their utility is, if they even have one. In order to discuss the wide range of motivations and use, I will be using France and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as case studies. The nuclear programs of these two states are both technologically impressive and sources of national pride. In examining the differences and similarities in the cases of France and the DPRK, I will discuss what nuclear weapons are for. In doing so, these cases underline the argument that the strategic use for nuclear weapons is not defensive, in the traditional understanding.

In order to demonstrate the unorthodox utility that comes from nuclear proliferation and the procurement of nuclear weapons, I will examine the French nuclear program. I will discuss what the motivations are for states to “go” nuclear if not for the purpose of strategic defense. I will also question if a state can justify prioritizing this kind of project over the basic state welfare programs. The French case exposes how irresponsible nuclear proliferation can be and it undercuts the notion that nuclear weapons are defensive weapons. Then, I will look at the North Korean program to consider

⁴¹Joseph Masco, "Nuclear Pasts, Nuclear Futures; or, Disarming through Rebuilding," *Critical Studies on Security* 3, no. 3 (February 2, 2016): 311.

France

In the French case, nuclear weapons development was a reaction to World War II and the Nazi Occupation that destroyed French infrastructure. Following the war, France found itself to be positioned as a secondary power, with the markers of prestige crucial to Great Power status seemingly unattainable. The priority of French foreign policy in the post-war era became hyper-focused on reestablishing its position in the international order as a Great Power.⁴² For the French, nuclear weapons held great significance as they were indicative of status, and were, therefore, essential to rebuilding France as a Great Power. France sought out to embody the distinctive attributes of Great Powers in order to reclaim the status it once had.

When considering the role that nuclear weapons play in shaping state identity, SIT must be taken into account. SIT explains how individual identity is shaped by membership in a particular social group.⁴³ According to this theory, if a state experiences a decline in status, the state will engage in identity management strategies, specifically competition and mobility, to reverse this perceived decline. Therefore, based on the assumptions of social mobility strategy specifically, states participate in social assimilation strategy in order to improve their status. The French example demonstrates that the ultimate utility of nuclear weapons is symbolic, and they do not operate as objects of strategic defense, in the way that conventional weaponry does.

Additionally, France prioritized building their nuclear program over rebuilding the country after the war. This kind of behavior is not only morally impracticable but also irrational. France decided to focus on building unusable weaponry instead of welfare programs for their people that were desperately needed after the war. This aspect of the French case is interesting for two reasons. The first because it demonstrates how SIT informs the reasoning behind nuclear

⁴²Isabelle L. Scarborough, "Securing a Seat at the Table des Grands: French Identity and the Application of Identity Management Strategies in Post-War France" (Undergraduate Senior Project., Bard College, 2018), 2.

⁴³ McLeod, "Social Identity"

acquisition, which is applicable in the case of al-Qaeda as they are clearly mimicking the behavior of states as a way to elevate and legitimize their status. The second because of the stark difference in behavior between France and Daesh. France prioritized their nuclear program above everything else when the country was in ruins because it needed to be a Great Power again. Daesh on the other hand had a completely different to-do list. Daesh prioritized establishing state infrastructure and social programs first, recognizing that a functional state is essential for nuclear proliferation. Ultimately, the behavior and priorities of Daesh are more responsible and rational than that of France.

DPRK

In the case of the North Korean program, the lines are blurred. Though the ultimate goal of this program is recognition, the North Korean program was not concerned with their program being representative of national identity. While the French were fixated on emphasizing the “Frenchness” of their program, North Korea was not bothered by who developed their program as long as it was in their control at the end of the day. The intentions of the North Korean program have historically been understood to be intended for deterrence, domestic legitimacy, international prestige, and coercive diplomacy.

The effects that the North Korean program has domestically and internationally are unique to the regime, as it is the only nuclear state that is a totalitarian regime. From the view of North Korea, nuclear proliferation is very reasonable, as the acquisition of these weapons effectively achieves foreign policy objectives that would otherwise have to be fulfilled another way. Regime survival is of the utmost importance and by deterring allied attacks North Korea is shielded from the violence of adversaries. The North Korean program, despite the missing element of national identity, is a source of national pride. The development of this nuclear

program confirms that the regime is of equal status with the United States. A significant outcome that is symbolic more than anything else is the unprecedented power the North Korean program has to undermine the U.S.-South Korean alliance. They are able to undermine this otherwise sound alliance by planting seeds of doubt that Washington would come to Seoul's defense once the American homeland is under nuclear threat.⁴⁴

Ultimately, the utility of nuclear weapons for North Korea is a means of gaining equal status with the United States, and a way to avoid being completely dependent of China. North Korea has been in pursuit of gaining formal recognition as a nuclear weapons state. Like all other proliferators, North Korea understood that there are particular characteristics that distinguish the Great Powers from lesser powers, Therefore, membership in the nuclear club became the means to being recognized as an equal. North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho told the UN General Assembly that Pyongyang's ultimate goal is to "establish the balance of power with the United States."⁴⁵

In each of these cases, nuclear weapons are procured as a means of elevating their status in the international sphere. Nuclear weapons held great significance as they were indicative of status, and were, therefore, essential to projecting the image of the state of being in line with the Great Powers. France, Iran and North Korea similarly developed their nuclear programs after voicing the desire for equal status in the international order. In the French case, what mattered to De Gaulle was "to be able to say that France was *politically* a nuclear power." Later De Gaulle stated "...a nation is nothing if she does not have the nuclear weapon,"⁴⁶ which further clarified the position nuclear programs maintain in the international normative order.

⁴⁴ "Why Does North Korea Want Nukes?," BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-40733644>.

⁴⁵Ri Yong Ho, "North Korean Foreign Minister Remarks at U.N. General Assembly" (address).

⁴⁶Lawrence Scheinman, *Atomic Energy Policy in France under the Fourth Republic* (Place of publication not identified: Princeton University Press, 2016), 189.

So then, what is the purpose of nuclear weapons, if not for strategic defense? Nuclear weapons are objects that are symbolic of status, not objects of strategic defense. States utilize these weapons in order to symbolize their power, modernity, legitimacy as well as project a perceived national identity.

Means of acquisition

There are three possible avenues groups may explore in their pursuit of acquiring a nuclear weapon: building it, stealing it, or receiving it as a gift from a country that has a nuclear program. To build such a weapon requires advanced technologies, infrastructure, funding, and first class scientists. Schelling argues that the process of either developing a weapon or convincing a state to provide one requires an ability to operate with a clear organizational mission that is stable across time.⁴⁷ Additionally, McIntosh and Storey point out that nuclear development by any terrorist group “would place scientists and scientific approaches quite literally at the center of their thinking about nuclear weapons.”⁴⁸

Stealing a nuclear device is getting progressively more challenging. Within contemporary international norms, the importance of safeguarding nuclear material is a shared priority. This common agenda was made clear in the Nuclear Security Summit process which sought to increase efforts by states to “secure nuclear weapons and weapons-usable materials will impede the ability of a non-state terrorist group to buy, build, or steal a bomb.”⁴⁹

The scenario where a nuclear device is gifted to a non-state group is a highly sensationalized one that has been made to seem more likely than it is in reality. A situation where

⁴⁷ Thomas C. Schelling, "Nuclear Deterrence for the Future." *Issues in Science and Technology* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2006).

⁴⁸ McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 9.

⁴⁹ Robert Litwak, *Deterring Nuclear Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2016), 119.

a group receives not only a nuclear device, but also technology to enable delivery, is not out of the question but it is highly improbable. In the event this were to happen, the state providing the device would only consider giving it to their most capable allied group. McIntosh and Storey recognize that “while size and wealth are hardly guarantors of rationality, overcoming the significant barriers to nuclear capability would minimally require internal discipline, well-developed hierarchies of command, and the capacity for long-term planning.”⁵⁰ All of these requirements are characteristic of a highly strategic organization. There is very little reason that a nuclear state would provide a non-state group with the same capabilities, and even if a state were interested in doing so, the guaranteed political and economic backlash make this scenario implausible. After all, states value nuclear weapons because of their symbolic significance, not as real defensive weapons. If nuclear desire is rooted in Social Identity theory, a state would not rationally give that up just to arm an allied non-state group.

⁵⁰ McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 9.

Part Three

Terrorists as Rational and Strategic Actors

Terrorism as rational

The claim that terrorists are rational and strategic actors is usually met with some pushback. Terrorists are portrayed in pop-culture as irrational and unpredictable, but that is not historically accurate. Hoffman explains that historically, terrorist groups are relatively conservative in their tactical choices and given the stakes involved are especially likely to look to state strategies as a means of informing their own.⁵¹ When viewed through the lens of state strategy, the actions of non-state groups are often comparable to the actions of states.

Terrorism is exceptionally rational. Generally, even the most extreme and unusual forms of political behavior follow an internal strategic logic. Martha Crenshaw explains that if there are “patterns in a group’s behavior instead of random idiosyncrasies in their actions, it is possible that a strategic analysis will reveal said patterns.”⁵² Similarly, McIntosh and Storey suggest that treating these organizations as being strategic actors is less convoluted than treating them as “little states.”⁵³ They argue that treating them as strategic actors is ultimately the most straightforward, though deductive, framework available that allows the multifaceted nature of terrorist groups to be considered without oversimplifying them. It is imperative to consider terrorist groups as being strategic actors, because like strategic actors, they “assess options, possess interests, and actively seek to make decisions that best match their organization’s actions with their goals.”⁵⁴ At the end of the day, the general reluctance and refusal to think of terrorist groups as being rational and strategic actors undermines counterterrorism measures and ultimately makes them ineffective. This is because the assessment of the group in question is

⁵¹ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

⁵² Martha Crenshaw, "The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice in Origins of Terrorism," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 24.

⁵³ McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 7.

⁵⁴ McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 7.

flawed at its core. The issue with imagining terrorist groups as irrational actors is that if policies are based on this assumption, and this assumption is wrong, then the policies are unproductive.

I find Lionel McPherson's understanding of terrorism to be the most relevant in the context of this discussion. He believes it to be the deliberate use of force against ordinary noncombatants, where violence is a means for political ends.⁵⁵ McPherson considers the morality of terrorism, compared to conventional war. He says "many people believe that terrorism is necessarily and egregiously wrong." This is the view that he considers to be dominant.

McPherson explains that while this perspective appears to be morally correct and incontestable, this dominant view is more complicated than it appears to be at first glance. This view maintains that terrorism is akin to murder. If terrorism is the same as murder then that "forecloses the possibility that terrorism, under any circumstance, could be morally permissible."⁵⁶ In other words, this view puts forward that all terrorism is wrong, no matter what. This view contends that terrorism is so morally unacceptable as a means that in order to label it as wrong and illegitimate it's unnecessary to even consider the political objectives of those who engage it.⁵⁷ This view however, is complicated by the problem of definition. There is no definition that is universally accepted, so how can this undefined ambiguous form of political violence be distinctively wrong or entirely irrational, and illegitimate?

Once this dominant view is reconsidered, the primary challenge for those who believe that terrorism is distinctively wrong is accounting for noncombatant casualties of conventional war.⁵⁸ As it becomes clear that terrorism and conventional war are not as different as one intuitively believes, the dominant view's notion that terrorism is distinctively wrong must be

⁵⁵ Mcpherson, "Is Terrorism Distinctively Wrong?", 525.

⁵⁶ Mcpherson, "Is Terrorism Distinctively Wrong?", 524.

⁵⁷ Held, "Terrorism and War", 62.

⁵⁸ Mcpherson, "Is Terrorism Distinctively Wrong?", 525.

reevaluated. McPherson's comparison between terrorism and conventional war is upheld even when wars are fought according to international law, codified in the 1977 Geneva Protocol I on International Armed Conflicts.⁵⁹ So, while terrorism might be morally objectionable, such reasons apply equally to conventional war. Granted, the laws of war are not beyond moral scrutiny. Therefore, using violence to bring about change is not inherently worse, from a moral point of view, than using violence to prevent such change.⁶⁰

At the end of the day, all terrorism involves the quest for power. This pursuit can be for the power to dominate and coerce, to intimidate and control. Ultimately, terrorism seeks to effect fundamental political change, while the means they employ are designed to achieve their end goals. As a result of this quest, terrorists plan their operations to be carried out in such a way that will send a message. Ideally, it will shock the international community, impress their constituents, and intimidate their adversaries. Hoffman says that by planning their attacks in this way, they ensure that their acts are "sufficiently daring and violent to capture the attention of the media and, in turn, of the public and government as well."⁶¹ He makes the claim that terrorists are rational in their employment of such violent acts. Although terrorism is "often erroneously seen as indiscriminate or senseless, terrorism is actually a very deliberate and planned application of violence."⁶² Put differently, the goal is "to ensure maximum damage done with minimum loss of life,"⁶³ in order to make a statement, without undermining their claim to legitimacy, or stifling their end goal.

⁵⁹ Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff, eds., *Documents on the Laws of War*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁶⁰ Held, "Terrorism and War", 68.

⁶¹ Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 267.

⁶² Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 267.

⁶³ Amy Waldman. "Masters of Suicide Bombing: Tamil Guerrillas of Sri Lanka." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, January 14, 2003.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/14/world/masters-of-suicide-bombing-tamil-guerrillas-of-sri-lanka.html>.

In the case of nuclear weapons, this logic is taken further with the argument that there are few realistic demands that terrorists can make by threatening the use of such indiscriminate weapons and little that they can accomplish by using them that they could not achieve otherwise. In other words, the terrorists' aims and objectives could just as easily be realized through less extreme measures than the detonation of a nuclear device. If a non-state group were to go nuclear, they would participate in nuclear deterrence and in doing so gain legitimacy. Although these groups wouldn't become states if they were to go nuclear, they would become legitimate, whether the global powers like it or not. Terrorists imitate governments, and nuclear weapons are in the arsenals of the world's major powers. That makes them legitimate.⁶⁴

Terrorists would not detonate a nuclear weapon because the effects it would have would not benefit the terrorists, or advance their aims. Michael Jenkins explores the idea of terrorists going nuclear in his article "Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?" and he explains why he does not think that the prospect of a terrorist group with nuclear capabilities is as horrific as we imagine it to be. He argues this idea saying, "terrorist actions have tended to be aimed at producing immediate dramatic effects, a handful of violent deaths—not lingering illness, and certainly not a population of ill, vengeance-seeking victims."⁶⁵ Jenkins does not think that detonating a nuclear weapon would be at all rational for a terrorist group to do because if they were to detonate such a weapon they could not halt the continuing effects of their act. He supports this claim by examining the habits of terrorist groups. He says that "it has not been the style of terrorists to kill hundreds or thousands. To make hundreds or thousands of persons terminally ill would be even more out of character."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Jenkins. "The Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism", 31.

⁶⁵ Brian Michael Jenkins, "Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?" (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, P-5541, November 1975), 6-7.

⁶⁶ Jenkins, "Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?", 6-7.

If killing civilians is seen as collateral damage then some forms of terrorism may not be as far from conventional wartime killing as one might think.⁶⁷ The doctrine of double effect reiterates the importance of intentionality and allows combatants to kill civilians when their deaths are unintended, although foreseen, side effect of a necessary military operation.⁶⁸ The doctrine of double effect supports the argument that terrorist groups are more ethical than states, as it is centered around intention. Terrorists engage in violence as a last resort, to bring about change, and often to fight oppression. States engage in violence to suppress and combat change. When considering intentionality, using violence to bring about change is not inherently worse from a moral point of view than using violence to prevent such change,⁶⁹ especially if the change that is being fought over is freedom.

Terrorist Groups

The following sections look at individual terrorist groups. I will examine why terrorist groups want to acquire a nuclear weapon and how they would possibly use it. To consider the differences and similarities between terrorist groups I will be discussing Al Qaeda, Daesh, Atomwaffen Division (AWD) and Aum Shinrikyo because of their organizational characteristics and capabilities. I have chosen these four groups because I believe that they are, or were at one point, in a position where nuclear acquisition is possible. Additionally, al-Qaeda and Aum Shinrikyo have demonstrated an unmatched commitment and interest in nuclear acquisition. I will first introduce each group, discuss their objectives, consider each group's nuclear desires and probable means of acquisition, and finally I will offer an analysis of how these groups would likely behave once going nuclear.

⁶⁷ Gross. *Moral Dilemmas of Modern War*, 183.

⁶⁸ Gross. *Moral Dilemmas of Modern War*, 187.

⁶⁹ Held, "Terrorism and War", 68.

It's easy to put all terrorist groups together in the same category, putting al-Qaeda, Daesh, Aum Shinrikyo, ETA, the Atomwaffen Division, KKK and IRA all under the same umbrella. While yes, these groups all do meet the outlined definition of terrorism, they are not similar enough to be tossed together. Daesh and Al Qaeda would act very differently than their accelerationist counterparts, Aum Shinrikyo and Atomwaffen Division. Terrorism is far from monolithic, but much of the literature on it makes over generalizations.

Atomwaffen Division (AWD), Aum Shinrikyo, Daesh and Al Qaeda are the primary groups of concern when it comes to nuclear terrorism. All of these groups have expressed an interest in acquiring a nuclear weapon, and have taken steps to do so. These groups diverge when it comes to their motivations. AWD and Aum Shinrikyo are similarly motivated because they are both "apocalyptically minded" and believe in accelerationism. Whereas Daesh and al-Qaeda are motivated by establishing a caliphate and hope to remove all foreign influences in Muslim countries. The threat posed by AWD is unique because of who they are as a group, but also who the members are. AWD is remarkably dangerous because of their presence in the US government. Members of far-right groups, including AWD, exist as key personnel in important federal institutions, like the courts and the military.⁷⁰ This conflict of allegiance creates an environment for insider threats to proliferate. More than that, there is a very real possibility that the far-right could infiltrate nuclear facilities, where they could access sensitive information and nuclear materials. It would be a terrible mistake to overlook their potential.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Leo Shane, "Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism up Again in Poll of Active-duty Troops," *Military Times*, [Page #], accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>.

⁷¹ Rebecca L. Earnhardt, Brendan Hyatt, and Nickolas Roth, "A Threat to Confront: Far-right Extremists and Nuclear Terrorism," *The Bulletin*, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://thebulletin.org/2021/01/a-threat-to-confront-far-right-extremists-and-nuclear-terrorism/>.

From a realist perspective, Daesh and al-Qaeda are doing exactly what is expected of them. They are concerned with state building and in order to achieve their goals, they will mimic the behavior of states. If given the opportunity, al-Qaeda would likely follow in France's footsteps of prioritizing a nuclear program to establish legitimacy and credibility. Osama Bin Laden defended his expressed interest in nuclear weapons by saying that "if America used chemical or nuclear weapons against us, then we may retort with chemical and nuclear weapons."⁷²

Similarly, groups belonging to the far-right, like AWD, view nuclear weapons as useful tools to bring about a societal collapse that will result in total revolution. This genre of terrorist groups who adopt accelerationism hope to set off a series of violent chain events, with violence begetting more violence, destabilizing society. Indiscriminate, highly destructive acts of terror—like a nuclear attack—are therefore perfect tools to sow chaos and accelerate this societal collapse. Earnhardt, Hyatt, and Roth argue that the nuclear terrorism threat posed by far-right groups "is amplified today by an ideology focused on accelerating the collapse of society and a documented interest in pursuing nuclear terrorism."⁷³ While the foundational ideology of AWD and Aum are not too similar, their motivations and apocalyptic desires are strikingly alike.

Senior Brookings Fellow Daniel Byman discusses the divergent goals and targets of Daesh and Al Qaeda in his article "Comparing Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets." He says that although the goal of al-Qaeda is to ultimately overthrow the corrupt regimes in the Middle East (calling them apostate regimes) and replace them with real Islamic governments, al-Qaeda's primary enemy is the United States. Al Qaeda sees the United States as being the root cause of the central problems in the Middle East. The group views the United

⁷² Sara A. Daly, John Parachini, and William Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo, Al Qaeda, and the Kinshasa Reactor: Implications of Three Case Studies for Combating Nuclear Terrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005), 26.

⁷³ Earnhardt, Hyatt, and Roth, "A Threat,"

States as an occupier and articulates goals that are much like independence and manifest destiny. By targeting the embassies and spaces with ties to the United States, Al Qaeda hopes to eventually prompt the United States to withdraw troops from the Middle East and Africa, and end support for these Muslim state regimes, thereby withdrawing from the region altogether. Ideally, this would leave these 'apostate' regimes vulnerable to attack from within, and with time popular support for a caliphate will proliferate.⁷⁴

If these four groups were to be placed on a spectrum, al-Qaeda is perhaps the least likely to detonate a nuclear weapon if they were able to acquire one, and AWD the most likely. Al-Qaeda mimics state behavior and has expressed an understanding and appreciation for the strategic opportunities offered by the possession of nuclear weapons. Al-Qaeda's behavior is remarkably similar to the behavior of states, which makes sense since they have aspirations of establishing a caliphate themselves. While they are more extreme than al-Qaeda, Daesh demonstrates a sophisticated level of organization and has a power structure that supports a broad spectrum of government capabilities and an expansive bureaucratic apparatus. AWD is apocalyptic in nature and dreams of establishing a white ethnostate or whites-only utopia, viewing the *Turner Diaries* as a manifesto and roadmap. They believe that only extreme violence will allow them to realize this fantasy. Aum, like AWD is an accelerationist group that is apocalyptically minded, however they are motivated by the prospect of inciting armageddon. Aum envisions a scenario where a nuclear armageddon destroys the world as we know it and in a Noah's Ark-like scenario, only the loyal Aum followers would be spared.

⁷⁴ Daniel Byman, "Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets," *The Brookings Institution*, accessed April 29, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/>.

Strategies and Behavior

Acts of terror are designed to create a response. As a tactic, terrorism is utilized as way to meet their ends through military means. This expression of violence generally utilizes three specific methods of action. Disorientation, target response, and gaining legitimacy. First, disorientation is designed to drive a wedge between citizens and governmental authorities. This alienates the people from the state, and eventually the government will appear to be incapable of providing protection. Second, target response forces a government to respond in a way that benefits the group. This method provokes the state to engage in response tactics that are either illegal or unacceptable to their constituents, which then removes any chance of there being a political middle-ground. Third, gaining legitimacy. This is a strategy that is consistent throughout time periods and across ideological divisions. In this strategy, the terrorist group attempts “to exploit the emotional impact of the violence to insert an alternative political message and seek to broaden support, often through the media or political front organizations.”⁷⁵

Terrorism is political in nature and the violent acts that are carried out by terrorist groups are a means to an end. Hoffman explains that “all terrorists exist and function in hopes of reaching this ultimate end.”⁷⁶ These means are highly calculated and strategic in nature, since there is an understanding that their violence must be viewed by their constituents as being proportional and not outrageously violent. The calculated violence is important to the terrorist group’s image. Hoffman explains why there is such an emphasis on how the group appears to the public, and why this impacts how they carry out attacks. He says that “publicity and attention are paramount aims, but at the same time there is a conscious recognition that only if their violence is properly calculated and at least in some way regulated will they be able to achieve the effects

⁷⁵Peter R. Smith and Dr M. L. R. Smith, "Strategic Terrorism: The framework and Its Fallacies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (2005): 590.

⁷⁶ Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 268.

they desire and the political objectives they seek.”⁷⁷ In other words, while publicity is an important factor in advancing the group’s goals, the attacks should not go against the proportionality of means principle just to get media coverage.

There is a general acceptance of Brian Jenkins’s assessment from 1975 that when terrorists take violent action, they want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead. Non-state groups are highly strategic in nature and their actions are planned meticulously. In his book Hoffman says that “terrorism—contrary to popular perception—is not a mindless act of fanatical or indiscriminate violence; rather it is a purposefully targeted, deliberately calibrated method of pursuing specific objectives at acceptable cost.”⁷⁸ This idea of an acceptable cost upholds Just War Theory’s principle of proportionality. The indignation of the terrorists is rarely uncontrolled, and almost always carefully planned. He claims that “contrary to both popular belief and media depiction, most terrorism is neither crazed nor capricious.” He argues that terrorist attacks are more often than not premeditated and carefully calculated down to the last detail. The violent attacks carried out by terrorist groups are unique to other forms of heinous violence because they are specifically designed to communicate a message and are designed to further the goals of the group.⁷⁹

Furthermore, for violence to become fruitful, for it to reach the stated aims, it should be undertaken with a proper political base and intention.⁸⁰ Terrorism is theatre,⁸¹ non-state groups participate by performing acts of symbolic significance.⁸² Oftentimes the attacks carried out by these terrorist groups are highly symbolic, and work to somehow advance their cause. Terrorists

⁷⁷ Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 252.

⁷⁸ Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 279

⁷⁹ Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 242.

⁸⁰ Gerald McKnight. *The Mind of the Terrorist*. London: Joseph (1974), 179.

⁸¹ Brian Michael Jenkins, “International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict,” in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf, eds., *International Terrorism and World Security* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), 16.

⁸² Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 245.

want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead. Hoffman explains the rationality and the claimed logic behind violence of this kind. He says, “these groups, accordingly, recognize the need to tightly control and focus their operations in such a manner as to ensure both the continued support of their local “constituencies” and the sympathy of the international community.”⁸³

Despite the potentially detrimental effects violent attacks can have on a group, Hoffman says that they have a “clear appreciation both that violence has its limits and that, if used properly, it can pay vast dividends.”⁸⁴ In other words, the level of violence the group engages with must stay within the bounds of what the terrorists’ “target audience” will accept, while still communicating their message and advancing the groups end goals. This idea of calculated violence is in line with the principle of proportionality of means. The legitimacy of terrorist violence is upheld by Just War Theory since “terrorists often believe that violence is the only course of action open to them that can advance their political objectives.”⁸⁵ Therefore, violence is the last resort.

Between these four groups, the behavior and strategic approaches of each are unique to them. This is to say that each of these groups will act differently, and must be viewed as independent from each other. All too often, nuclear terrorism is approached as a monolithic threat. This approach makes generalizations about terrorist groups and their behavior, failing to consider what it is about the group that has allowed them to survive and be in the position they are in. If all terrorist groups were the same, they would not be so successful. The following sections look at each specific group and consider the nature of the group, their motivations,

⁸³ Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 246.

⁸⁴ Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*, 248.

⁸⁵ Held. “Terrorism and War”, 69.

availability of resources conducive for nuclear acquisition, and the strategic opportunities created by acquisition.

In their article “Between Acquisition and Use: Assessing the Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism,” Christopher McIntosh and Ian Storey argue that even if a terrorist group were to have the capacity to do so, a nuclear terrorist attack is the least likely outcome. McIntosh and Storey offer three drawbacks that would inevitably result if a weapon were to be detonated: the costs associated with an attack, the benefits forfeited in terms of the options foreclosed by using the weapon, and the relative strategic value of alternative courses of action.⁸⁶ With the possible exception of AWD, the drawbacks would make detonation the least desirable option.

McIntosh and Storey say that there are four options available to groups once they are armed that fall short of detonation. Latency, ambiguity, opacity, and blackmail. These options depend on the conditions under which the organization will use the weapon and whether or not the organization discloses the newly acquired nuclear capacity.⁸⁷ Each available option allows for the weapon to be used as a deterrent, and possibly as a bargaining chip. They say “each option here...places the nuclear-armed group in a more powerful position vis-à-vis the target, conferring advantages in terms of bargaining, leverage, and the ability to offer credible threats it would not have if it did not possess the weapon.”⁸⁸ For non-state groups these options create an opportunity where they have close to equal power with states.

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda was founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam and a few others during the Soviet–Afghan War. This group operates as a complicated network of Islamic

⁸⁶McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 1.

⁸⁷McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 14.

⁸⁸McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 15.

extremists and Salafist jihadists, which can be broken down into two major components. There is the ‘core’ and then there are the regional affiliates. Al-Qaeda is unique because of this structure, they have the core, and then they have regional affiliates that are smaller scale militant groups who subscribe to al-Qaeda’s ideology and align themselves with the goals of al-Qaeda by incorporating the name of the core group into their own. The group was a network of networks. In addition to these two major components al-Qaeda has also inspired ‘grassroot’ jihadists⁸⁹ and the formation of small cells, and while these groups are not officially part of the organization, they distort the size and scope of al-Qaeda. This distortion is ultimately beneficial to al-Qaeda since it is almost impossible to determine how many members, supporters, and sympathizers it has at any given time, making it seem even more unpredictable.

Al-Qaeda sees themselves as a kind of a vanguard organization. This vanguard identity was fortified as al-Qaeda helped “kindred groups to facilitate the jihad they believed was necessary to establish a global caliphate.”⁹⁰ As an organization, al-Qaeda is highly organized and has clear objectives. The overarching long-term goal was to establish a unified caliphate. Bin Laden’s vision for al-Qaeda was for the caliphate to become a strong sovereign state.

Al-Qaeda has explicitly expressed a desire to establish a new Islamic state. The caliphate is imagined to govern according to Sharia law, it would encompass all current Muslim states, and all formerly Muslim states. Popular support was important. The establishment of such a caliphate is a long term goal, and in the meantime the group engaged in violence that was calibrated, and “pragmatic”⁹¹ in order to further this goal. Al-Qaeda’s approach to violence is a calculated one. Al-Qaeda is unambiguous when it comes to motives.

⁸⁹ Scott Stewart, “Defining Al Qaeda,” Stratfor, October 18, 2012, Accessed March 15, 2021, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/defining-al-qaeda>

⁹⁰ Stewart, “Defining Al Qaeda”

⁹¹ William Rosenau and Alexander Powell, “Al-Qaeda Core: A Case Study,” *CNA Analysis & Solutions*, October 2017, 40. 3.

As far as the list of rational actors goes, al-Qaeda is at the top. Al-Qaeda raises the bar for how groups should act if the goal is to be a rational actor, as they “behave almost exclusively according to the principles of *realpolitik*.”⁹² Although it feels inappropriate to argue that al-Qaeda is a role model for *realpolitik*, there is no doubt that it is an extremely compelling idea. The central doctrines of Islamic extremism followed by al-Qaeda compelled them to act in particular ways that happen to be in line with these principles.

On the surface, it’s easy to point to al-Qaeda as an irrational actor because of their religious ‘fanaticism’, but they are a highly calibrated organization. Bin Laden did say one of the reasons he was pursuing nuclear weapons was because he felt a divine justification for nuclear procurement. Proclaiming that acquiring nuclear weapons is a “solemn religious duty”, with a vision of using them to defend his co-religionists from the “Jews and Crusaders.”⁹³ More interestingly, al-Qaeda also expressed this desire in terms that are used by states. He argued that having “nuclear weapons will improve security”⁹⁴ because he saw them as a “deterrent”.⁹⁵ Recognizing the potential power offered by nuclear weapons, they become an obvious means to this end.⁹⁶ Bin Laden famously said “if America used them against us we reserve the right to use them.”⁹⁷ If able to acquire one, there are a variety of ways al-Qaeda would likely use it. It’s probable they would use it as a bargaining chip to finally force the US out of the Middle East, and as a way to establish sovereignty for the caliphate.

⁹²McIntosh and Storey, "Between Acquisition," 8.

⁹³ Rahimulla Yusufzai, “Conversation with Terror,” *Time (Canada)*, January 11, 1999, 14.

⁹⁴ Sara A. Daly, John Parachini, and William Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo, Al Qaeda, and the Kinshasa Reactor: Implications of Three Case Studies for Combating Nuclear Terrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005), 27.

⁹⁵Bin Laden is quoted in Daly et al (2005, 27) as saying “we have chemical and nuclear weapons as a deterrent and if America used them against us we reserve the right to use them against them” via an interview in Dawn.

⁹⁶ “Interview with bin Laden Reported,” March 31, 1998, FBIS document no. FTS1998033100479.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Hamid Mir, “Osama Claims He Has Nukes: If U.S. Uses N-Arms It Will Get Same Response,” *Dawn (internet edition)*, www.dawn.com/2001/11/10/top1.htm.

Al-Qaeda first sought to acquire usable nuclear materials in Sudan during the mid-1990s. Despite their efforts, al-Qaeda got caught in a scam that involved “Red Mercury” and radiological waste.⁹⁸ After failing in Sudan, al-Qaeda became more determined to acquire usable nuclear material, turning to Pakistani scientists for help. Alas, despite al-Qaeda’s determination, there was little progress made in acquiring material, or constructing the infrastructure necessary for such an endeavor. According to documents obtained during and after the invasion in 2001, al-Qaeda may have tried, unsuccessfully, to purchase weapons from various countries, including Russia.

Al-Qaeda has demonstrated their ability to plan, organize and execute large scale operations. They have carried out six major attacks, including 9/11, embassy bombings, and the USS Cole. In each case, the plans were developed years in advance,⁹⁹ even going as far as to stockpile their shipments of weapons and explosives, and starting and operating businesses with the intention of them being safehouses in the future. Given the nature of nuclear weapons development, acquisition, and preservation, these kinds of projects are not ones that can be completed by just any group. Importantly, every successful nuclear weapons program to date has been led by teams, rather than by single individuals.¹⁰⁰ Team work makes the dream work.

More than any other group, al-Qaeda was in the best position to be the first nuclear non-state. Al-Qaeda had many of the resources and attributes necessary to acquire nuclear weapons. The group was seemingly well equipped. Its leaders were bent on acquiring nuclear weapons; it had substantial financial and other resources; it had a state sanctuary (in some respects, the Taliban were actually a front for al Qaeda).¹⁰¹ And on the supply side, they seemed

⁹⁸Daly, Parachini, and Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo*, viii.

⁹⁹ Dominic Tierney, "The Twenty Years' War," *The Atlantic*, accessed August 23, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/twenty-years-war/496736/>.

¹⁰⁰Daly, Parachini, and Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo*, 35.

¹⁰¹Daly, Parachini, and Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo*, 46.

to be in a great position for this dream to become a reality. Especially since the radioactive material was notoriously unsecure in the former Soviet Union, and they had a network of a few nuclear scientists.

If any group was going to “go” nuclear, it was going to be al-Qaeda. So why didn’t they? The full scope of difficulties is unclear, and it’s likely a combination of numerous factors. When met with this question, a British government official said it was plausible that al-Qaeda had just had so many other things going on at the same time that nuclear acquisition just fell through the cracks. He said al-Qaeda “had too many projects running simultaneously—that’s a downside to having a fluid, flexible organization.”¹⁰² It’s entirely possible that if some circumstances were different, we would be living in a world with nuclear non-states. Thankfully not.

Daesh

Daesh is a Salafi-Jihadist militant organization based mainly in Syria and Iraq, engaging with a particularly violent ideology. Daesh self-identifies as a caliphate, claiming religious authority over all Muslims. At its height, Daesh controlled territory roughly the size of Great Britain, which included about a third of Syria and almost half of Iraq, with the key cities of Mosul and Raqqa.

The group’s goal is to establish a real Islamic caliphate, first in Iraq and Syria, eventually establishing a global influence. During the Iraq War, Daesh joined the Iraqi insurgency under the name Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) but quickly started to lose its strength and influence. Things turned around for Daesh in 2011 when the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and the onset of the Syrian Civil War created a power vacuum, which AQI stepped in to fill.¹⁰³ In 2013, the group

¹⁰² Daly, Parachini, and Rosenau interview with UK Ministry of Defence official, Washington, D.C., December 5, 2002.

¹⁰³ Mapping Militant Organizations. "The Islamic State." Stanford University. Last modified April 2021. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/>

changed its name from AQI to al-Dawlah al-Islamīyah fī al-‘Irāq wa-al-Shām (Daesh).

Throughout 2013 and 2014, Daesh gained territory in both Syria and Iraq, and in June, 2014 Daesh officially declared the establishment of the caliphate. In order for Daesh to be a legitimate entity, it must have control of territory.

Despite being the “problem child of jihad”, Daesh is an extremely organized group with an expansive bureaucracy. The government is structured, like many states are, in a top-down bureaucracy. The territory held by the caliphate is organized as provinces, the bureaucracy is split between civil and military branches, and ministry-like councils for every state function from legal, media, and financial, to leadership, and intelligence councils. Clearly, the organizational capabilities of Daesh are significant, and if the group reemerges it won’t have to start from scratch.

In 2019 Daesh lost everything. Caliph Baghdadi was assassinated, the land that was once the core of the caliphate was reclaimed by Syria and Iraq, and the surge of foreign fighter recruits ended. Even with these major blows Daesh continues to be an active security threat, especially in Afghanistan. If the group can successfully step into the power vacuum the US will create when troops withdraw in September 2021, Daesh will have the opportunity to dominate the defense landscape in Afghanistan. Daesh has positioned itself in such a way that they will take over Taliban territory and have control of all infrastructure in that territory. This means that Daesh could potentially have the infrastructure and systems to operate in a manner similar to a state. Control of this kind of infrastructure creates endless defensive opportunities for Daesh.

Daesh views themselves as a legitimate state, and in many respects acts accordingly. While their behavior is not as close to states as al-Qaeda’s, Daesh is more concerned with being a caliphate than a state in the current Westphalian state system. So, while they might not be

conducting themselves in a way states are expected to, they are acting in such a way they view as permissible. Social assimilation was not as important to Daesh as it was to al-Qaeda, though mimicking behavior is not entirely out of character for Daesh.

Unlike al-Qaeda, Daesh's pursuit of nuclear weapons was not substantial when compared with their other priorities. This contrast makes sense, Daesh is younger and smaller than al-Qaeda. While Daesh was actively interested in a nuclear weapon, their primary focus was on establishing their caliphate and developing institutions to ensure the needs of the people are met. This approach is fascinating because it is hyper-rational.

When Daesh captured the city of Mosul in 2014, they suddenly were in control of one of Iraq's major cities. Mosul University was under Daesh control, where two caches of Cobalt-60 was being stored for medical use. Cobalt-60 is highly radioactive, useful in treating cancer, but also can be a "core ingredient" of a nuclear explosive device. When Iraqi soldiers liberated Mosul, they found that the Cobalt-60 was exactly where it was left in 2014.

The conclusion that government officials came to was that Daesh "failed to utilize it, because they could not determine how to access the Cobalt-60 without exposing themselves to deadly radiation."¹⁰⁴ However, I think this assessment is a dangerous one. When these kinds of generalizations are carelessly made, similar claims proliferate, culminating in ill-informed narratives, which shape public perception and the political imaginary.

To say that Daesh failed to utilize the Cobalt-60 because they couldn't figure out how to access it without exposing themselves is puzzling, to say the least. This explanation paints Daesh as a group incapable of scientifically advanced projects and promotes the idea that Islamic Extremist groups, such as Daesh, are just fanatical, primitive, and unintelligent militants who are

¹⁰⁴Antonia Ward, "Is the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism Distracting Attention from More Realistic Threats?," *RAND Blog*, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/07/is-the-threat-of-nuclear-terrorism-distracting-attention.html>.

lunatics. Given Daesh's meticulous bureaucratic and financial system, and overall state-like structure, it is clear that Daesh is a highly capable and competent terrorist group.

I think the idea that Daesh was essentially too stupid to do anything with the Cobalt-60 horribly underestimates Daesh's capabilities. Additionally, the conclusion that officials came to relies on the assumption that constructing a bomb was a priority for Daesh. This assumption closely resembles the acquisition-use presumption, which is the idea that once a nuclear weapon is acquired by a group, they will use it right away. The conclusion put forward above assumes that once radioactive material is acquired by a group, they will use it to construct an explosive device. This assumes that building such a device is a priority for the group, and in the case of Daesh it is not.

Although a nuclear weapon was not a top priority for Daesh, it was still an area that was being explored. In 2016 Belgian authorities discovered that members of Daesh were spying on a nuclear scientist, and planning some sort of attack. This plot was discovered during the investigation of the three coordinated suicide bombings in Belgium, two at the Brussels Airport and one at the Maalbeek metro station, 32 civilians were killed and over 300 injured.¹⁰⁵ Two Belgian brothers, Khalid and Ibrahim el-Bakraoui, were found to be responsible.

The perpetrators of the attacks were part of the Daesh cell in Brussels, which was also involved in the 2015 attacks in Paris. Upon searching the home of the brothers authorities stumbled upon "large quantities of explosives and bomb-making equipment."¹⁰⁶ Authorities also discovered they had been spying on a nuclear scientist who worked at the Tihange Nuclear

¹⁰⁵ Lasoen, Kenneth (2017). "Indications and warning in Belgium. Brussels is not Delphi". *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 40 (7): 927–962.

¹⁰⁶ The New York Times, "Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui: From Bank Robbers to Brussels Bombers," *The New York Times*, [Page #], accessed March 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/world/europe/expanding-portraits-of-brussels-bombers-ibrahim-and-khalid-el-bakraoui.html>.

Power Station, and speculated that they were assessing their target, and planning on using or acquiring nuclear material from this facility.¹⁰⁷ The Brussels cell is not necessarily reflective of Daesh as a whole, which is important to note because the actions of individuals who are part of a group do not always align with the goals of the group. From this example, it is clear that although Daesh is not making nuclear material acquisition a priority, the group is not against it if this some faraway cell is interested in pursuing it.

Like al-Qaeda, Daesh wants to reestablish a caliphate. Yes, the ideology Daesh follows is of the doomsday variety, but that does not mean that they would use a nuclear weapon if they had one for several reasons. Firstly, it does not make much sense to detonate a nuclear weapon on territory it hopes to one day control. Secondly, a retaliatory attack by any nuclear state guarantees a complete eradication of the group. Finally, all of the unique benefits and opportunities offered by nuclear weapons are forfeited upon detonation.

Ultimately, Daesh has been unable to “demonstrate the capacity for the long-term planning of state institutions and processes.”¹⁰⁸ Although there is a lot of overlap between al-Qaeda and Daesh, a major divergence is their approach to establishing a caliphate, and this is clear in how they have each pursued nuclear weapons. Because al-Qaeda viewed a caliphate as a far-off long term goal, they were able to pursue operations that required time. Viewing it as a marathon, not a sprint. Whereas Daesh was eager to establish their caliphate as soon as possible, and did not really care about popular support. At the end of the day, one of the major reasons Daesh’s nuclear dreams were unable to come to fruition was the group’s failure to work as a team on a long term project. This is not to say that Daesh’s leadership abilities were insufficient.

¹⁰⁷ Ward, "Is the Threat," *RAND Blog*.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Caris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War* (blog), <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/isis-governance-syria>.

Daesh prioritized establishing their caliphate over nuclear weapons. This choice is hyper-rational, and the complete opposite of what France chose to do in 1960.

Atomwaffen Division (AWD)¹⁰⁹

Founded in 2015, the Atomwaffen Division (AWD) is an American neo-Nazi terrorist group, their name translates from German to “nuclear weapons division.” The name indicates an obvious desire for nuclear weapons, while also alluding to the idea that they are part of a larger far-right network, and specializing in nuclear weapons. AWD purposefully included “division” in the name, which further suggests there are other divisions making up a larger corps. This group has expressed an extreme desire to be violent. The group is decentralized by design, set up as a web of intertwined cells, all working on instigating the collapse of civilization.

Members, who can be fairly described as accelerationism, believe that violence, depravity, and degeneracy are the only sure way to establish order in their dystopian and apocalyptic vision of the world. They see what they are doing as preparing for a race war, to combat, as they say, the cultural and racial displacement of the white race.¹¹⁰ Given their desire to wipe out civilization, the threat of mutually assured destruction that supports much of deterrence theory is not very relevant in this case.

AWD is one of the most notable far-right groups that operates in the United States. AWD was a byproduct of the Iron March (IM), which was an online fascist forum launched in 2011 and taken down in 2017. AWD also used the forum to traffic firearms.¹¹¹ IM became the key

¹⁰⁹ Atomwaffen briefly disbanded in 2020 and was recently renamed to the National Socialist Order.

¹¹⁰ Anti-Defamation League, "Atomwaffen Division (AWD)/ National Socialist Order (NSO)," *Extremism, Terrorism & Bigotry* (blog),

<https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/atomwaffen-division-awd-national-socialist-order-nso>.

¹¹¹ "Canadian Soldier With Ties To Neo-Nazi Terrorist Groups Arranged For Illegal Weapons Sale In Bosnia," *Canadian Anti-Hate Network* (blog), entry posted 2019.

online space for young neo-Nazis, interested in militant fascism to organize offline activism. The organizational structure of AWD is set up to be a series of terror cells, working together to spark the collapse of civilization.¹¹² They are inspired by the ideas of accelerationism, which is the “the modern breed of violent far-right extremism is becoming more destructive, and nuclear weapons certainly fit into this profile of catastrophic violence.”¹¹³

The group’s ideology is best described as neo-Nazi accelerationism. AWD Accelerationists believe that the modern, post-industrial society cannot be redeemed. Instead, they believe it ought to be driven into apocalyptic collapse so a white ethnostate or whites-only utopia can be constructed in its wake. AWD is modeled as a leaderless resistance movement, with a network of so many diffuse cells, their prospects for acquiring a nuclear weapon seem dim. Members of AWD tend to be younger than the average neo-Nazi supporter. They are the first generation to have grown up online. Violence is fetishized, and viewed as the only realistic way to initiate their end goal, racial cleansing. Such a purge is meant to lead to a national socialist order replacing a world that, from the perspective of its members, is a dystopian, apocalyptic hellscape where only the enemies of the white race profit and flourish.

On one hand, the groups' unmatched preference for extreme violence, and their complete disregard for the world as we know it make the prospect of detonation plausible. On the other hand however, nuclear weapons are not critical to starting a race war and they can settle for other kinds of weapons. Despite their name, it’s not the end of the day if other weapons have to be utilized instead. AWD wants to wreak havoc immediately, and for them if it can spark societal

¹¹²Southern Poverty Law Center, "Atomwaffen Division," *Hate Watch* (blog), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division>.

¹¹³ Earnhardt, Hyatt, and Roth, "A Threat"

collapse, well then weapons are weapons. On top of their impatience, AWD is decentralized and seemingly does not have the resources nuclear weapons require.

AWD is one of the most notable groups with nuclear aspirations, but they were not the first far-right group in the US to express an interest in using radioactive or nuclear materials in an attack. Over the past decade there have been countless plans and numerous failed attempts. In 2004, Demetrius Van Crocker, a National Socialist Movement member, tried to assemble a dirty bomb¹¹⁴ with a plan “to detonate a radiological “dirty bomb” in Washington, D.C., or use poison gas against black people.”¹¹⁵ In 2008, after the election of Barack Obama, James Cummings began devising a plan to build a dirty bomb in preparation for the inauguration. Cummings was able to buy thorium-232 and depleted uranium online and began to stockpile it as he collected the other essential materials for a dirty bomb.¹¹⁶ In both of these cases, they were able to operate undetected. The only reason authorities discovered Cummings’ stockpile and elaborate plans was because they were investigating his home as a crime scene. His wife shot him, which was the only reason authorities were even interested in the Cummings home.

AWD is unique because they are not interested in the strategic value of nuclear weapons, and far more invested in them because of their capacity for sheer destruction. While AWD is a small group of accelerationist neo-Nazis, the network of the far-right is enormous. As mentioned earlier, their name means nuclear weapons division, as if they are a division within a larger group. Much of the far-right come together online, which allows more people access to these

¹¹⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Domestic terrorism: Tops lead to sting, prison for plotter,” The Federal Bureau of Investigation: Stories, November 29, 2006, https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/stories/2006/november/terror_112906

¹¹⁵ Nuclear Threat Initiative, “‘Dirty Bomb’ Materials Uncovered in Maine Residence,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, accessed February 12, 2009, <https://www.nti.org/gsn/article/dirty-bomb-materials-uncovered-in-maine-residence/>.

¹¹⁶ Will Cathcart and Joseph Ari Epstein, “White Supremacists Want a Dirty Bomb,” *Foreign Policy*, accessed August 16, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/16/white-supremacists-want-a-nuclear-weapon/>.

ideas, and an individual can be a member of multiple groups, as many overlap anyway. Therefore, evaluating the threat posed by AWD is especially challenging. Another factor that makes these extremists remarkably dangerous is their presence in the US government. Members of the far-right exist as key personnel in important federal institutions like the courts and the military.¹¹⁷ This conflict of allegiance creates an environment for insider threats to proliferate. More than that, there is a very real possibility that the far-right could infiltrate nuclear facilities, where they could access sensitive information and nuclear materials.

Matthew Gebert is an unnerving example. While employed at the State Department, working as a foreign affairs officer, Gerbert also was a host of the white supremacist podcast “The Fatherland” where he spoke of his desire to build a country for whites only. He said “[whites] need a country of our own with nukes, and we will retake this thing lickety split...that’s all that we need. We need a country founded for white people with a nuclear deterrent.”¹¹⁸ This language is fascinating because of how it positions nuclear weapons. He expresses a desire to “build” a country, which is a radical shift in rhetoric from AWD’s apocalyptic visions of destroying society. The most remarkable detail of this example is how Gerbert articulated the value of nuclear weapons. Gerbert says “we need...a nuclear deterrent”, which indicates that he recognizes and values the strategic benefits offered by nuclear weapons as well as the prospect of sovereignty. While Gerbert is not a known member of AWD, this case highlights how expansive and diffuse the far-right is.

¹¹⁷ Leo Shane, "Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism up Again in Poll of Active-duty Troops," *Military Times*, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>.

¹¹⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, "U.S. State Department Official Involved in White Nationalist Movement, Hatewatch Determines," *Hate Watch* (blog), <https://www.splcenter.org/gebert>.

One of the founders of AWD, Brandon Russell is an example of just how intertwined the far-right is with the government, at all levels. Not only was Russell in the Florida National Guard, he also studied nuclear physics as an undergraduate and had a history of posting instructions online for building improvised nuclear reactors.¹¹⁹ Along with other AWD members, Russell was arrested in 2017 while on their way to the Turkey Point nuclear power plant, with plans of launching explosives at it. While searching Russell's apartment, police discovered that his garage was stockpiled with explosives. Specifically, police found pipe bomb components, traces of the explosive hexamethylene triperoxide diamine, and several detonators. As previously noted, AWD idealizes Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh, and they have turned to him for inspiration. In the search police found ammonium nitrate and nitromethane, which is the same combination used by McVeigh in 1995. They also recovered potassium chloride, red iron oxide, potassium nitrate, and homemade fuses fashioned from brass 5.56 mm rifle cartridges.¹²⁰

The indiscriminate nature of AWD's weapons acquisition reveals how the group values nuclear weapons. More than anything, AWD is interested in extreme and unrelenting violence, and have no problem copying methods that 'worked', their copy of McVeigh's bomb is an example of this. As indicated by their name, members of AWD have an explicit interest in nuclear terrorism, but they are not going to turn down other opportunities for violence just because they are not nuclear. AWD has very little interest in the strategic value of nuclear weapons, and is far more interested in their destructive capabilities. Unlike al-Qaeda and Daesh, AWD has very little demonstrated interest in using a nuclear weapon for anything other than detonation, and instead plans to "cleanse" society by killing as many people as possible. While

¹¹⁹A. C. Thompson, "An Atomwaffen Member Sketched a Map to Take the Neo-Nazis Down. What Path Officials Took Is a Mystery," *Pro-Publica*, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/an-atomwaffen-member-sketched-a-map-to-take-the-neo-nazis-down-what-path-officials-took-is-a-mystery>.

¹²⁰ Thompson, "An Atomwaffen"

the ultimate goal for the group is nuclear acquisition, their skill set and the resources available to them are more compatible with conventional explosives. Conveniently for AWD, Radiological Dispersal Devices (RDDs) combine conventional explosives, and radioactive material together to make ‘dirty bombs’.

Aum Shinrikyo

Aum Shinrikyo is a Japanese doomsday cult, designated a foreign terrorist group by the U.S. Department of State, which was founded by Shoko Asahara in 1984. Aum is best known for their sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995.

Aum’s ideological framework is an apocalyptic, doomsday belief structure. Within this structure, the world is divided into two opposing forces—good and evil.¹²¹ Shoko Asahara, the founder of Aum, has outlined a doomsday prophecy that is unique to his followers, according to him a Third World War will be instigated by the United States, where the epic final conflict escalates to a nuclear 'Armageddon'.¹²² Members of Aum firmly believe they will survive after the apocalypse is over, and therefore they have an incentive to trigger the apocalypse because “their own salvation depends upon fighting the final conflict and eradicating the enemy.”¹²³

Within this apocalyptic ideology, Aum professes that all of humanity will end after this conflict. But rest assured, it’s not all bad news. While this belief clearly states that everyone will die, Aum is sure to point out that it will not end for the ‘elite’ few who join them.¹²⁴ Ultimately, Aum's mission is not only to inspire the pursuit of salvation, but also to survive these End Times.

¹²¹ Daly, Parachini, and Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo*, 5.

¹²² Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying the World to save It: Aum Shinrikyō, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999).

¹²³ Daly, Parachini, and Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo*, 5.

¹²⁴ Lifton, *Destroying the World*.

In order for this to happen, there must be the apocalypse, so they sought out to spark just that by way of weapons of mass destruction.

Like AWD, Aum Shinrikyo cared far more about the destructive value offered by nuclear weapons, than the strategic value. Nuclear weapons were desired but not crucial to the group's apocalyptic goals. In the early 1990s, Aum Shinrikyo began a quest to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Aum began recruiting scientists and engineers to help with their project. The cult had an impressive network and financial resources, which allowed them access to people and spaces they might not otherwise have had. Aum recruited highly educated followers for the purpose of gaining human capital. Among these followers were more than 300 scientists with degrees in medicine, biochemistry, biology, and genetic engineering. This variety was great and allowed Aum to diversify their scientific activities. They didn't have to put all their eggs in one basket so to speak, which is a rational decision and ensures low-risk if one of the operations fails. Just one problem, Aum missed a very important basket.

For a group who is so interested in nuclear acquisition, the complete absence of nuclear scientists is puzzling. Not only is a well coordinated team crucial for building nuclear weapons, but the skill sets necessary are specific and non-negotiable. According to Carson Mark, a nuclear weapons builder, a nuclear weapons team would "at a minimum require a nuclear scientist, a mechanical engineer, an electrical engineer, and an explosives expert."¹²⁵ Their member's skill sets leaned more towards chemistry and biology, which is one explanation for why Aum was ultimately more successful in developing chemical and biological weapons than nuclear.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Mark Carson et al., "Can Terrorists Build Nuclear Weapons?" *Nuclear Control Institute, Washington, D.C.*, accessed at www.nci.org/k-m/makeab.htm; U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, *Hearings on Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Case Study on Aum Shinrikyo*, October 31, 1995; 60.

¹²⁶Daly, Parachini, and Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo*, 10.

At first, Aum hoped they would be able to exploit their relationships with high level Russian officials, where they could buy nuclear materials in exchange for access to foreign technologies. They focused their efforts on Russia as a potential source of nuclear weapons, but despite Aum's efforts to convert social capital into nuclear material, they were ultimately unable to acquire a weapon. After this substantial setback, Aum shifted their focus away from buying a weapon, and committed to building one instead. Asahara believed Australia would be unaffected by Armageddon, so members invested in land to mine and enrich their own uranium there. Aum bought a sheep farm at Banjawarn Station in 1993, as a place to test their chemical weapons and mine uranium.¹²⁷

Developing a nuclear capability is a huge commitment, especially if a group is enriching the materials themselves. With time running out, and numerous failed attempts to mine uranium, Aum abandoned the project – shifting focus again – and instead decided to focus on chemical weapons. Time was running out for Asahara. In his predictions, Asahara claimed Armageddon would start in 1995 so he needed to figure out how to make that happen. The nuclear weapons option became too slow, laborious and complicated, so Aum decided to abandon Australia and focus on developing chemical weapons. The chemical program was much more developed than the nuclear program. Aum went full speed ahead with chemical weapons, and in March of 1995 Aum used sarin gas in the Tokyo subway as a way to “start” the Armageddon.

Aum expressed an explicit interest in acquiring a nuclear weapon, and took steps to pursue it, but despite their impressive financial resources and human capital they were unable and to successfully “go” nuclear. Aum was constrained by their own ideology, personnel, and a miscalculation of their relationships with Russian officials. Asahara, and Aum members valued the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons more than the strategic benefits they offer.

¹²⁷Daly, Parachini, and Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo*, 18.

Ultimately, like AWD, Aum was interested in starting Armageddon above all else. If that meant changing the way they would start it, that was acceptable.

Reevaluating the threat

Counterterrorism and counterproliferation efforts are focused on Islamic extremism and the focus of policies to counter nuclear terrorism has historically been on these external threats. This shift was informed by an increase in armed insurgencies in the Middle East during the 1970s. The aftermath of the 1972 Munich massacre only intensified these fears, as it made clear how global and devastating the impact of these kinds of events could be. In 1979, as the Iran hostage crisis was shown on national television for over a year, the idea that ‘radical Islam’ was a serious threat to America became popularized. Within the U.S. there is a perception that the threat of nuclear terrorism is not a domestic issue. The threat is treated as if it is something uniquely foreign, stemming from Islamist terrorism networks like Daesh and al-Qaeda. Although flawed, this view is unsurprising in the post 9/11 world we live in. In reality, the threat of nuclear terrorism is greatly domestic.

The far-right movement in the U.S. has a long history of nuclear terrorism ideation and attempted procurement. This is not to say the focus should only consider the domestic threat of nuclear terrorism, rather that the disproportionate emphasis, and almost exclusive focus on Islamist groups is irresponsible and dangerous. The white-power movement was on the rise, especially among Vietnam veterans. With combat experience and formal military training, these men organized a ‘resistance’ movement against the federal government. Much like the far-right today, they saw the government as the source of societal corrosion.

The far-right movement over the last few decades has been informed and inspired by *The Turner Diaries*, which was published in 1978. Often referred to as the “bible of the racist right,” the book follows a group of right-wing extremists on their journey to invade the U.S. Capitol to overthrow the U.S. government. The book serves as a road map for terrorist groups on the far-right, ending with the main character detonating a nuclear bomb over the Pentagon. This is the mission of groups like AWD. Their goal is to cause complete and total destruction of society.

The threat posed by Islamist groups like al-Qaeda and Daesh is entirely different than the threat posed by the far-right. Al-Qaeda and Daesh mimic state behavior, are highly strategic, and have a demonstrated interest in group survival, which is impossible if a nuclear weapon were to be detonated. Both of these groups value nuclear weapons for their strategic significance, not for the destructive capabilities, meaning they are interested in nuclear weapons, not RDDs.

Movements centered around accelerationism and apocalypticism do not value them for the same reasons. Far-right terrorist groups like AWD pursue nuclear acquisition because of their capacity for violence. The threat posed by groups like AWD is distressing because of their interest in complete destruction, and disregard for society at large.

Because there has been an almost exclusive focus on foreign threats, groups belonging to the far-right have been able to develop and expand. Members of these groups have been able to successfully join federal institutions and the armed forces, infiltrating these spaces. The threat of nuclear terrorism must be reevaluated and policy enacted accordingly. Only when the acquisition-use presumption is eliminated, and groups analyzed as independent rational actors, can the true threat of nuclear terrorism be understood.

Conclusion

This paper aims to demonstrate that the monolithic understanding of nuclear terrorism, which is based on the acquisition-use presumption, is inaccurate. The literature on nuclear terrorism disproportionately focuses on examining how a group could go nuclear while failing to consider what would happen once a weapon is acquired. Because of the dominance of the acquisition-use presumption, there is a gap in the broader understanding of nuclear terrorism.

Specifically, this paper aims to demonstrate that the threat posed by nuclear terrorism is less straightforward than often imagined. Nuclear terrorism is imagined to be a monolithic and external threat, informed by the acquisition-use presumption. The acquisition-use presumption has contributed to how groups are generalized, and terrorism further essentialized.

This paper has demonstrated the shortcomings of such generalizations, and the four cases selected highlighted the distinctive motivations, strategies, and goals of each group. The case studies of France and the DPRK demonstrate that nuclear weapons do not operate as traditional means of security, as their unuse is the source of security. These two cases reveal that the strategic use for nuclear weapons is not defensive, but rather symbolic.

The examples of al-Qaeda, Daesh, AWD, and Aum Shinrikyo underscore just how broad the ideological spectrum is. While these four groups were selected because of their demonstrated interest in nuclear acquisition, this analysis has argued that the motivations and likely utilization of each group are distinctive and should be explored as such. In order to highlight the differences of each group I discuss them each individually. In all four cases, I introduce each group, discuss their objectives, consider each group's nuclear desires, probable means of acquisition, and then offer an analysis of how these groups would likely behave once going nuclear. This approach

allows for each group to be considered individually and minimizes the likelihood of over essentializing the strategic nature of each.

An important conclusion drawn from this paper was that terrorist groups must be analyzed as individual entities who have distinct motivations, resources, and strategic capabilities. Nuclear terrorism is not unique to Islamic extremist groups, and by focusing so heavily on groups like al-Qaeda and Daesh, groups belonging to the far-right, like AWD, are able to expand and go largely unnoticed. Finally, this paper has explored the nature of various threats of nuclear terrorism. Ultimately, groups like al-Qaeda and Daesh are interested in nuclear weapons for the same reasons states are, and for that reason the likelihood of detonation is low. Whereas the threat of a dirty bomb, or radiological contamination is highest among groups on the far-right like AWD, and the destructive capabilities nuclear weapons offer are more desirable than their strategic value. If the research into this topic were to continue, one would expand the scope of the research, beyond nuclear terrorism, to consider the implications and consequences of essentializing terrorist groups.

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