



# MEDIA BRIEF

## AL-QAEDA'S BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS PROGRAM

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October 2013

*“Our world must take bio-security much more seriously... it would be comparatively easy for terrorists to cause mass death by using agents, such as anthrax or weaponized smallpox. Let’s not wait until something has gone terribly wrong to act collectively to meet this threat.”*

– Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, 13 February, 2005

## A PRESENT DANGER? THE SYRIAN CONNECTION

**The issue of al-Qaeda (AQ) acquiring biological weapons has so far been a remote preoccupation of Western intelligence services. However, with the Syrian crisis and the potential acquisition of biological weapons by AQ, the issue is now a clear and present danger.**

1. While the world has been focusing on the destruction of Syria's chemical weapon stockpiles, President Bashar al Assad’s biological weapons program is in fact a far graver danger that has not been tackled.

2. AQ’s affiliate in Syria, Al Nusra, may have access to biological pathogens or weaponized agents either of which would pose a threat to the international community. The Syrian civil war has left sections of the bio-pharmaceutical infrastructure destroyed and looting of labs has been observed, which could indicate that Assad is losing command and control over one of the most dangerous classes of weapons remaining in his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) arsenal. A very credible source has confirmed he saw, near Aleppo, a looted pharmaceutical laboratory, which was probably a cover for a biological weapons production site.

3. Syria's biological warfare programs are latent, highly compartmentalized and dual use, run under both legitimate and clandestine programs, laboratories, institutes and facilities. The fact that this looting took place in the Aleppo area where the rebellion – and in particular Al Nusra – is very strong tends to confirm that AQ may potentially be in possession of biological agents.

4. Unlike chemical weapons, maintained in military designated stockpiles which are generally identifiable and which Assad maintains command and control over, the structure of Syria's biological warfare programs are latent, compartmentalized and spread across its remaining bio-pharmaceutical infrastructure. The programs are designed to be highly agile to allow swift production if required. Several crash programs were reportedly developed in Syria to allow very quick mounting and deployment.

Should AQ acquire sections of Assad's BW program, it has the competence and expertise to weaponize and deploy agents. Acquisition of this capability poses a threat because many biological agents in Assad’s arsenal would not necessarily need to be weaponized in order to achieve a significant kill ratio.

## AQ'S HISTORY WITH BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

**As early as December 1998, Osama bin Laden talked about WMD in these terms: "It is a religious duty to have them; how we will use them? It is our business."**

In the 1990's AQ had a program manned by several scientists running in Khost and Jalalabad with a chemical and biological weapons directorate. It includes highly educated specialists:

- Al Masri holds a Phd in chemistry, and is considered al-Qaeda's nuclear weapons expert;
- Abu Kabab was AQ's biological and chemical weapons expert;
- Assadallah Abdul Rahman is also a biological weapons expert and leader of the AQ WMD directorate;
- Abu Bashir al-Yemeni is another bio-chemical expert;
- Ayman al-Zawahiri is a doctor and surgeon.

Although several of its top chemists have been killed, the intent to acquire, develop and deploy biological weapons has not seemingly diminished and several of its top BW specialists have been replaced by highly skilled scientists such as Yazid Sufaat.

The chronology of AQ's attempts at and statements regarding its acquisition efforts is extensive.

1. Ahmad Rassam, arrested on 14 December, 1999, in a plot to bomb LAX in the so-called Millennium plot, testified that Bin Laden was personally interested in using low-flying aircraft to disperse BW agents.
2. Documents found in Afghanistan, in 2001, ostensibly revealed that al-Qaeda was doing research on using botulinum toxin to kill 2,000 people.<sup>1</sup>
3. In France, Menad Benchelalli, a terrorist specialised in poisons who was arrested in 2002, had produced small amounts of ricin and Botulinum toxin that he intended to release in France.
4. The case of AQ operative, Kamel Bourgass, arrested in 2003 in Manchester is quite telling about AQ's obsession with manufacturing bio weapons. He had a biological weapons lab in his flat where he tried to produce ricin, cyanide, botilunum and other poisons.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters, 1 January 2002, "Al-Qaeda tested germ weapons"

<sup>2</sup> BBC News, 13 April 2005, "Killer jailed over poison plot", <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4433709.stm>

5. In 2003, an al-Qaeda manual on biological weapons was also discovered. They were developing dispersal technology for which there was no known military application. This meant the labs were developing technologies for use by terrorists.
6. With the capture of Khalid Shaykh Muhammad in 2003, investigators uncovered detailed information about production plans for chemical and biological weapons. According to captured documents, certain members of al-Qaeda had plans and the requisite material to manufacture cyanide and two biological toxins, and were close to producing anthrax bacteria.<sup>3</sup> Osama Bin Laden had seven full bio-chem laboratories for which he'd purchased state of the art equipment through the UAE and Uzbekistan.
7. In mid-2004 the Pentagon sent a report to Congress wherein it disclosed for the first time that al-Qaeda had a sophisticated biological weapons research and development effort underway. These endeavours were still inhibited by technological obstacles. Information we have on biological warfare labs today and the known relationships between AQ and members within the defence establishment of several countries would obviate the need to steal, divert or buy any kind of biological pathogen or agent. So, one of the primary inhibiting factors, that being acquisition of the biological pathogen and weaponization-milling or aerosolising, is no longer an obstacle.
8. Former French Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin claimed in 2005 at the Interpol bio-terrorism conference in Lyon, France, that "Al-Qaeda's biological program was further along, particularly with regard to Agent X, than pre-war intelligence indicated. The program was extensive, well-organised, and operated for two years before September 11 2001, but intelligence insights into the program were limited." <sup>4</sup>

De Villepin told conference members that after the fall of the Taliban, al-Qaeda cells moved to the Pankisi Gorge, Georgia, in order to continue efforts to produce anthrax bacteria, ricin, and botulinum toxin.<sup>5</sup> It appeared a couple of AQ scientists were trying to develop some kind of weaponized pathogen or chemical armament, using small bio-safety containment boxes.

9. Today, we are looking at very sophisticated recruitment techniques employed by AQ across North Africa. Intelligence sources have told us that in several countries, notably Morocco, Algeria, Sudan and Mauritania, AQ is training operatives in biological and chemical weapons and has successfully inserted terrorists into Europe through application processes for refugee status.

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<sup>3</sup> *Washington Post*, 23 March 2003, Barton Gellman, "Al-Qaeda Near Biological, Chemical Arms Production", <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/09/AR2006060900918.html>

<sup>4</sup> *De Villepin*, Conférence mondiale sur la prévention du bioterrorisme, 1 March 2005, <http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-de-Dominique-De-Villepin-2004-2005/Interventions/01.03.2005-Conference-mondiale-sur-la-prevention-du-bio-terrorisme>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

## THE 2009 ALGERIAN INCIDENT:

On January 6, 2009 the Algerian newspaper *Echorouk* reported that a number of terrorists had died of plague in one of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) training camps in Tizi Ouzou.<sup>6</sup> Another Algerian newspaper, *Ennahar*, affirmed that 50 terrorists had been diagnosed with the plague, 40 of whom already died.<sup>7</sup>

1. Algerian authorities were totally silent at the time. Our trusted sources also declined to comment about the veracity of the story. One can suspect that Algerians authorities were not too happy about the story being confirmed by American sources. Indeed the *Washington Times* confirmed through a senior U.S. intelligence official that an incident had taken place at an AQIM training camp that had to be shut down as a result.<sup>8</sup>
2. Coincidence or not: sixty terrorists from AQIM from Tizi Ouzou (the same region where the incident allegedly occurred) miraculously just decided they wanted to surrender to the authorities. It is very rare that such a large number of AQIM operatives defect at the same time. That could mean that they possibly became scared after watching several of their compatriots become infected with bubonic plague and did not want to participate further in the research and production of biological warfare agents which would likely result in their deaths. Unconfirmed reports further noted that many of these operatives were treated for bubonic plague.
3. In 2008, Pakistani terrorists came to train in AQIM training camps and may have one way or another contributed to the production of that biological agent. Interestingly, the *Washington Times* mentions an intercepted communication between AQIM leaders and AQ Central in Pakistan relating the mishap.<sup>9</sup> There was concern that several AQIM operatives had travelled to Pakistan and may have infected AQ's terrorist training camps in Pakistan.
4. AQIM did not wait long to refute this story. On Jan. 21, 2009, in a communiqué the group accused "some hypocrites who quoted their masters at the Algerian intelligence agency" of being behind this false story. They added that the AQIM *emirs* (chiefs)

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<sup>6</sup> *Echorouk*, 6 January 2009

<sup>7</sup> *Ennahar*, 24 January 2009, "50 cas de peste parmi les terroristes", <http://www.ennaharonline.com/fr/news/774.html?print>

<sup>8</sup> *Washington Times*, 19 January 2009, Eli Lake, "Al-Qaeda bungles arms experiment", <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jan/19/al-qaeda-bungles-arms-experiment/>

<sup>9</sup> *Washington Times*, 19 January 2009, Eli Lake, "Al-Qaeda bungles arms experiment", <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jan/19/al-qaeda-bungles-arms-experiment/>

quarantine the sick right away because the disease propagates itself very quickly.<sup>10</sup>

5. Al-Qaeda operatives in Europe had tried to develop biological weapons as mentioned earlier.
6. AQIM was "hired" by AQ central mostly because of its extensive network in Europe that could allow them to strike Europe at some point. AQIM's leadership has been under intense pressure to attack European targets in order to maintain its credibility. In fact, by not using a "conventional" weapon, AQIM would prove its value to AQ Central. If the group was indeed developing a biological weapon, it was surely destined for delivery in Europe, and most likely in France, a long time adversary and target of AQIM. Should such a strike occur, it would no doubt expose civilian populations to potentially highly lethal biological warfare agents.

### Al-Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP)'s will to acquire biological weapons

Since 2010, US President Barack Obama has been briefed on the threat of biological weapons coming from al-Qaeda in Yemen. In fact, AQAP has been very active in trying to produce ricin, and possibly package it around explosives and explode in confined public spaces such as airports or malls.

In its online Journal *Inspire*, AQAP has also publically called for, "Brothers with less experience in the fields of microbiology or chemistry, as long as they possess basic scientific knowledge, would be able to develop other poisons such as ricin or cyanide."<sup>11</sup> The US-born cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki, before his own demise in September 2011, had said, "The use of

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<sup>10</sup> *Echorouk*, 24 January 2009, "Le groupe salafiste refute l'existence de peste dans ses rangs", [http://www.echoroukonline.com/fra/s\\_curit/3401.html?print](http://www.echoroukonline.com/fra/s_curit/3401.html?print)

<sup>11</sup> *The New York Times*, 12 August 2011, Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "Qaeda Trying to Harness Toxin for Bombs, U.S. Officials Fear", [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/world/middleeast/13terror.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/world/middleeast/13terror.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

chemical and biological weapons against population centres is allowed and is strongly recommended.”<sup>12</sup>

As the *New York Times* reported in August 2011, the threat is taken very seriously and a secret US government task force was working with the Saudi and Yemeni services to counter this danger. Indeed the Saudis revealed that AQAP was trying to put the toxin in perfume bottles that were going to be sent to government, law enforcement and military officials.<sup>13</sup>

## A silent attack

The problem with bio-weapons, unlike chemical or nuclear, is the quality and weaponization for dispersal that counts, not the quantity. You do not need a stockpile and you do not need sophisticated delivery methods, in fact, that is no longer optimal. Bio-weapons are silent, and determining that an attack has occurred can be challenging. Failing to identify an attack at the earliest moment will lead to increased civilian mortality.

To provide a couple of examples: One gram of crystalline Botulinum toxin could theoretically kill a million people. It's the most toxic substance known to man and it's easy to transport and easy to conceal. As most people know, in the 1990s the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan attempted three times to use aerosolized botulinum toxins as a weapon of terror against US military personnel. They obtained the *Clostridium Botulinum* bacteria from soil samples in Northern Japan. The types of pathogens or biological agents terrorists are likely to use are variable.

In many instances, a bio-weapon attack would be an international public health emergency, due to the inherent nature of biological pathogens, toxins and viruses that *could* spread like fire through the modern means of transportation. Such an attack could require drastic measures to be taken to counter the spread of an epidemic. Measure such as quarantine, voluntary or otherwise may need to be considered especially if the pathogen released was modified to be highly infective and transmissible. While forced quarantine was used during the Yugoslavian smallpox outbreak of 1972, a deliberate, well-orchestrated release of a weaponized biological agent would certainly present major obstacles to counter and control this in democratic states.

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<sup>12</sup> *ABC News*, 3 May 2012, Randy Kreider and Brian Ross, “Al-Qaeda Cleric’s Call From Grave: Attack With Bio Weapons”, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/al-qaeda-clerics-call-grave-attack-bio-weapons/story?id=16268233>

<sup>13</sup> *The New York Times*, 12 August 2011, Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, “Qaeda Trying to Harness Toxin for Bombs, U.S. Officials Fear”, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/world/middleeast/13terror.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/world/middleeast/13terror.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)