

Abstract

Against the backdrop of a pandemic that has overwhelmed and caused great damage to nations across the world, the issue of bioterrorism has received renewed attention. There is increasing concern that ill-intentioned actors' interest in bioterrorism might revive as Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) are witnessing the devastating effect of biological threat agents and national authorities' inability to control the COVID virus and its consequences.

Simultaneously, technological developments are decreasing the economical, practical, and intellectual barriers for VNSAs to enact advanced mass destruction bioterrorist attacks. The crux then, lies in the fact that bioterrorism-related incidents, thus far, have been scarce and limited in scope despite increasing technological opportunities. Indeed, the world has yet to witness a successful mass casualty bioterrorist attack. The divergence between the room of opportunity available to VNSAs and the seeming lack of efforts to exploit these opportunities to advance their bioterrorism capabilities, instigates further research on the issue to improve our understanding of the current and future bioterrorism threat.

This paper aims to improve our understanding of the bioterrorism threat by conducting an empirically grounded qualitative evaluation of VNSAs' current competency related to biological threat agents. The evaluation will be based on a cross-ideological study of a number of original English and Arabic language instruction manuals distributed online by jihadists and extreme right-wing actors. Subsequently, the study seeks to answer the following question: *What is the current level of competency demonstrated in Violent Non-State Actors' online instruction manuals concerned with biological threat agents?*

The paper will approach this question by considering the level of innovation, technical quality and sophistication demonstrated in these manuals. The findings from this analysis imply that VNSAs' competency to enact advanced and large-scale bioterrorist attacks remains low. These manuals have not previously been qualitatively evaluated and the study, thereby, seeks to contribute to the field by broadening the empirical foundation on which to assess the bioterrorism threat. The empirical insight provided in these manuals can add value to counterterrorism and security practitioners' foundation to assess the current, and predict the future, threat of bioterrorism.