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## ISIS Seizes Nuclear Material—but That's Not the Reason to Worry

"Like the Taliban's Afghanistan before 9/11, the Islamic State may become a safe haven for people from other groups and countries to train and plot complex attacks."

by **Matthew Bunn**

The Iraqi government has told the United Nations that when the group now calling itself the Islamic State (formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, sometimes referred to as the Islamic State

of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL) seized the city of Mosul, it also acquired some 40 kilograms of uranium compounds from the university there. Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations, Mohammad Ali al-Hakim, warned that "terrorist groups have seized control of nuclear material at the sites that came out of the control of the state." (See the excellent account from Frederik Dahl of *Reuters* here.)

This has provoked a bit of a hullabaloo on the internet (see, for example, here and here) – but I would argue it's time for everyone to calm down. All of the highly enriched uranium (HEU) that once existed in Iraq – the material that could really be used for a nuclear bomb, which Iraq had as fuel for research reactors provided by Russia and France – was removed after the 1991 war. (Saddam Hussein launched a "crash program" to make a bomb out of that HEU after the invasion of Kuwait, but didn't succeed before the war intervened.) Iraq's most dangerous radiological sources that could be used in a so-called "dirty bomb" were largely removed in a cooperative effort after the 2003 war. Former IAEA safeguards chief Olli Heinonen has confirmed that there should be no enriched uranium in Mosul. IAEA spokeswoman Gill Tudor told Dahl that "on the basis of initial information we believe the material involved is low grade and would not present a significant safety, security, or nuclear proliferation risk."

What we appear to be talking about here is 40 kilograms of compounds of natural or depleted uranium – useless for a terrorist group trying to make a nuclear bomb. It's of no significant use for a "dirty bomb" either, as uranium is only very weakly radioactive. Even if intentionally dispersed in a city, it would pose only a modest health hazard (far less than the risk to human life from virtually everything else the Islamic State has been doing). It's not clear this even demonstrates an interest by the Islamic State in getting materials for a nuclear bomb – they may have just seized whatever happened to be lying around at the university, without thinking in any detail about what they were going to use it for.

This is not the first time uranium has been compromised in Iraq since the ill-begotten U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Many forget now that the United States failed to properly secure the al-Tuwaita nuclear site, and barrels of uranium "yellowcake" were looted – not for the yellowcake, but for the barrels, which local residents used to store food, thereby creating a significant local contamination problem. (See here for a useful account of investigating the resulting issues.)

But while this particular uranium is not much of a worry, the larger picture is starting to make me bite my nails a bit. The Islamic State now controls a big chunk of territory, hundreds of millions of dollars, and thousands of armed troops – and it has made clear that its ambitions are global. Its statement declaring itself the caliphate promised by Allah was an explicit invitation to violent Islamic

extremists from all over the world to join them.

Like the Taliban's Afghanistan before 9/11, the Islamic State may become a safe haven for people from other groups and countries to train and plot complex attacks. Having such a haven where the government is not going to interfere makes a huge difference in terrorists' ability to put together a really complicated plot – from something like 9/11 to a plot to make a nuclear bomb. Let's not forget that al Qaeda has repeatedly sought to get the kind of nuclear material that really could be put together into a nuclear bomb, and the expertise to do that job. The Islamic State or others taking advantage of its territory may well renew that effort. That's all the more reason to accelerate the effort to ensure that all the world's potential nuclear bomb material is effectively secured – and to be grateful that past efforts eliminated such material from Iraq long before the Islamic State came on the scene.

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