

Enhancing Public Preparedness for Chemical and Biological Terrorism

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](#)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



Brief Analysis

The crisis with Iraq, the decision to immunize U.S. troops against anthrax, and recent incidents in the U.S. and Britain (including at least one hoax) have together raised the American public's awareness of the threat posed by chemical and biological (CB) terrorism. Heightened awareness, however, has not been matched by greater public knowledge about how to respond to such an event. The lack of a public education effort is perhaps the greatest shortcoming of U.S. government efforts to deal with this danger.

What Has the U.S. Government Done Thus Far? The Department of Defense Domestic Preparedness Program is the cornerstone of U.S. Government efforts to counter the threat posed by terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The program consists of three main components:

- Efforts to train first-responders (fire, law enforcement, and medical personnel) in America's 120 largest cities to deal with incidents of WMD terrorism -- with particular emphasis on CB terror;
- Tests and exercises to evaluate the capabilities of local first-responders and supporting federal agencies;
- Training modules for state and local authorities using mass media technology (video, the internet, and CD-ROM), as well as a telephone Helpline and Hotline, to enable local first responders to tap the expertise available only at the federal level, 24 hours a day.

Pros and Cons of a Public Education Effort: What is lacking in all these preparations is a public education effort. There are probably several reasons for this. First, the government does not want to panic the public by openly discussing the nature of the CB threat. Second, CB terrorism poses inherently difficult problems, to which there are no easy fixes. Some chemical agents act within seconds or minutes, so by the time a chemical attack has been identified, many bystanders and first-responders will have become casualties. And unless a warning is received before an act of biological terrorism occurs (which is unlikely), there is no way to adequately protect a population against the entire range of biological terror threats. The first sign of a covert biological attack might be a mass outbreak of disease (though if a warning is received, civilians can obtain a reasonable degree of protection by wearing sanitary masks available at most pharmacies). Thus, there is no "one size fits all" solution to the problem,

and trying to deal with every possible contingency could result in a welter of confusing, contradictory guidelines, which civilians are liable to ignore or forget. Third, highlighting the CB threat could increase its appeal to certain terrorist groups.

While these concerns have some merit, there is a very strong case to be made for a public education effort. First, an emergency plan that ignores the public is profoundly flawed. It seems undeniable that the publication of basic guidelines concerning how to prepare for and respond to a CB terror attack could save lives and reduce the load imposed on the emergency services and the medical system, thereby mitigating the potential damage caused by an incident. This, in itself, would reduce somewhat the utility of CB terror. Second, publicizing protective measures that can be taken by the citizenry in the event of an incident can -- if done judiciously -- reduce the potential for panic during such a crisis. Striking the right balance to inspire confidence, not fear, is crucial here. Third, taking such a step would broadcast the message that the government is "on top" of the CB terror problem -- perhaps discouraging such acts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a vital principle is at stake: a democratic government has an obligation to provide its citizenry with the information it needs to deal with threats to public safety. If the threat of CB terrorism is serious enough to merit a domestic preparedness program, it is serious enough to merit discussion with the American people. Best to put out such information before an incident, rather than after -- when it is too late.

Toward a Plan for Action: On the eve of the 1991 Gulf War, Israel's Ministry of Defense published a book titled *States of Emergency: You Can Save Lives*, edited by Aryeh Nir and Yosef Eshkol. This book offered, inter alia, guidelines for preparing for and surviving a chemical attack in wartime that are applicable -- at least in part -- to a terrorist attack involving chemical agents. These guidelines could offer a model for an American public education effort. The main points are:

- **Decontaminate as Soon as Possible:** In the event of a chemical attack, depart upwind of the suspected source of contamination as quickly as possible. A foreign substance (such as an oily liquid) on one's skin or clothes may be a sign of contamination. To decontaminate skin, blot up the chemical agent with a clean rag or handkerchief, using a light dabbing motion. Do not wipe or smear the chemical over a wider area. Discard the rag or handkerchief and any contaminated clothes in a double plastic bag, then tightly seal and label the bag (be careful when removing garments to prevent contaminated areas from touching any exposed skin). Pour a detergent-water solution over the affected area, let it remain on the skin for several minutes, then rinse with liberal amounts of clean water. Be sure that the runoff does not splash onto any other part of your body. Casualties should, if possible, be carried or driven to receive medical help, in order to avoid physical exertion on their part, which could exacerbate their condition. However, care should be exercised that chemical agent on the clothing or skin of casualties is not spread, causing additional casualties.
- **Expedient Protection:** For those who lack specialized protective gear (gas mask and protective overgarments) the book explains how to make an expedient protective ensemble from household items. To protect the airways, place a rag or handkerchief dipped in a solution of baking soda and water (one spoonful of baking soda per cup of water) over one's nose and mouth. To protect the eyes (which some chemical agents attack), wear swimming goggles. Wear gloves on your hands (plastic bags secured at the wrist by rubber bands will do) and cover the remainder of the body with a large plastic sheet (a waterproof pancho or raincoat will also suffice) to prevent the absorption of chemical agent through the skin.
- **Stay in a Sealed Room if Possible:** If a chemical attack has occurred and you are indoors, stay indoors. Turn off all air conditioning, close all external air vents, and close all doors and windows in the apartment or office, and proceed to a room that you have chosen to seal. Lay down a wet rag along the length of the bottom crack of the door. Seal all windows and openings with adhesive (masking, sealing, or duct) tape. Seal even small openings,

such as keyholes. Seal broken windows with plastic sheets and tape. If you must eat, only eat food that was in a sealed glass container (such as soft drinks or fruit preserves). Finally, listen to the radio or TV for information and guidance and do not leave the room until you have received the all clear from the proper authorities.

Policy Implications: A modest, low-key public education effort focusing on the dissemination of guidelines for responding to a chemical attack for which there has been no warning, or a chemical or biological attack for which advanced warning has been received, should be a high priority for the U.S. government. Hopefully, such advice will never need be implemented. But, if CB terrorists strike, the publication of such guidelines might enable some -- perhaps many -- people to save their own lives, and those of others. This, in itself, is sufficient reason to justify such a step.

Michael Eisenstadt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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