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Can Nuclear Terrorists be Deterred?

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Conventional thinking since September 11, 2001, posits that nuclear-armed terrorists cannot be deterred. However, not all terrorist groups are alike. For instance, those that are strongly affiliated with a national territory or a constituency that can be held hostage are more likely to be self-deterred against using or even acquiring nuclear weapons. In contrast, international terrorist organizations, such as al Qaeda, or apocalyptic groups, such as Aum Shinrikyo, may welcome retaliatory nuclear strikes because they embrace martyrdom. Such groups may be immune to traditional deterrence, which threatens direct punishment against the group in question or against territory or people the terrorists value. Although deterring these groups may appear hopeless, nuclear forensic techniques could provide the means to establish deterrence through other means. In particular, as long as the source of the nuclear weapon or fissile material could be identified, the United States could threaten a retaliatory response against a nation that did not provide adequate security for its nuclear weapons or weapons-usable fissile material. This type of deterrent threat could be used to compel the nation with lax security to improve its security to meet rigorous standards.