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Interview of John Galatas (JG)  
with Efthimios Tsiliopoulos (ET)



**ET: How acute is the threat of CBRN attack in the West and how well are governments to deal with it?**

**JG:** CBRN threats can be broadly divided into two broad categories: man-made and accidental. The first implies terrorists and in certain instances, some rogue states. Accidental release of CBRN agents might be a threat as well and we all remember the Chernobyl accident (1986) and the fact that within 10 days radiation travelled from Ukraine to Greece. In that respect, nothing is as far away as it might look.

CBRN terrorism is a valid possibility for many reasons. Let me mention only a few: After 911, terrorist world need something equally or even more devastating to keep face and attract support and new followers that will be inspired from the catastrophe. Repetition of World Trade Center attack is rather difficult to be repeated mainly due to high surveillance and preventive measures taken since then. Usage of weapons of mass destruction might be a good candidate with an excellent cost to benefit ratio. The Tokyo subway sarin attack in 1985 is a vivid example of releasing nerve agents in megapolis environment.

Then there are many radiological sources in various parts of the world – mainly Russia – that are not sufficiently guarded. Theoretically a dirty bomb would be easily constructed.

Bioterrorism is more difficult to perform but may I remind you the universal upset during the recent 2010 swan flu pandemic that nearly panic populace all over the world – Greece included.

CBRN threats are not exotic threats and we better take them seriously. Western societies recognized this possibility and are doing considerable efforts to enhance their preparedness levels and have the resources to confront it. But the threat potential is huge and there are so many things to be done – even in the most technologically advanced nations.

**ET: Greece had made efforts to acquire CBRN capabilities. What has happened since and how ready is Greek state to respond to such an emergency?**

**JG:** Before 911, most of the countries thought that the threat was in the bottom of the list. They even make a joke with the NBC acronym, interpreting it as “No Body Cares”!

After 911, NBC changed to CBRN and lately to CBRNE with the addition of letter “E” meaning “explosives”; a component almost always accompanying CBRN.

During the Athens 2004 Olympic Games First Responders mainly Police and Fire Service and in a lesser degree EMS Service (EKAB) acquired CBRN capabilities - that is specialized training and equipment. The military also formed two highly specialized Units – one for operations in the Hot Zone and the other was hospital-based. Both created due the unwillingness of state medical system to be involved in operations in Hot and Warm Zones. I had the honour to be the Commandant of the Olympic Hospital CBRN Response Unit deployed at the Army General Hospital of Athens. My unit was the only one that was set in place during both the Olympics and Para-Olympic Games. In the post-Games era, the two military units merged to a new one that is now ready to deal with CBRN emergencies.

Unfortunately, at state level things did not progress well mainly because officials are always forgetting that highly specialized individuals are getting older, transferred, retired or got other duties. Very few capabilities are still operational from that period; mainly in the Fire Service.

So to answer to your question: It is my belief that the State is not currently ready to respond in such an emergency even with the support of the military.

**ET:** With the porousness of Greek borders and the unrest in the Arab World, how likely is it that toxic or fissile material will fall into the wrong hands?

**JG:** Greek borders are both extensive and porous. Mass illegal immigration is a solid proof of this fact. Among all these people sneaking illegally into Greece might be elements with devious thoughts and evil minds. These people might transfer materials that can be used for a large scale CBRN terrorist attack. It is not for sure. But it is logical. The perception that Greece is a friendly country is not valid anymore especially in the turbulent era we are all experiencing worldwide.

Interpretation of terrorism depends on which side you are in. So what we believe and support is not necessarily the way of thinking of the other side. Modern terrorists do not care for the populace and side effects produced and this makes employment of CBRN agents possible. Why we are so confident that such a possibility does not exist?

**ET:** Some believe that such a possibility is nonexistent. How likely is this, and shouldn't the country have the capability to react even if there was such an incident from "natural" causes?

**JG:** To believe that a threat, any threat, does not exist is at least naïve. The moment you say the word “threat” the same moment you recognize its existence.

The unexpected always happen and we have to be prepared for the worst – although we hope for the best. After the unsuccessful attempt to murder form British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, an IRA spokesman stated: “They have to be lucky all the time. We have to be lucky only once!” In that respect, we must attain at least a minimum of preparedness in all relevant entities involved in first response.

May I point out that the medical community is the weakest link in all state CBRN response plans. I think that a good solution to the problem would be the introduction of “Medical CBRNE defence” or “Terror Medicine” to the curricula of the university medical and nursing schools. In that way, all new front-line health professionals would acquire basic knowledge on CBRN issues and this will highly improve their differential diagnosis and management capabilities in case a real terrorist CBRN incident occur in urban environment.

This also applies for accidental release of CBRN agents let’s say from a chemical factory or a nuclear plant in a neighbouring or far away country. A good model for this might be the WMD-CSTs created in the United States. They are small units of approximately 30 highly specialized and equipped people and there is one unit for every state. Since Greece is a small country, two units would be enough.

If we manage to overcome the universal attitude that “It will not happen to us!” then a giant step to the right direction would have been achieved!

**ET:** Thank you Dr Galatas for the interesting points you highlighted!

**JG:** Thank you for the opportunity to raise attention to this important issue!