

Death should not be on the Menu

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According to recent news reports from around the globe, Islamic State (IS) chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and three other commanders of the terrorist organization are seriously ill after a failed attempt at assassination via food poisoning in Iraq. The IS leaders ate a lunchtime feast that was allegedly poisoned by an assassin.

The fears that food could be intentionally adulterated for purposes of economic or political disruption have been around for decades. This recent incident is not the first to catch the attention of world leaders.

In 1984, followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, a mystic, guru, and spiritual teacher in India, carried out perhaps the largest and most notable act of Food Poisoning / Bioterrorism on American soil in The Dalles, Oregon. The “1984 Rajneeshee Incident” resulted in 751 recorded illnesses, 45 hospitalizations, (no deaths) of citizens in The Dalles, from *Salmonella enterica* Typhimurium. A lengthy investigation found that the perpetrators spread the pathogen on surfaces in the Wasco County Courthouse, and introduced it into the drinking water, salad bars, and salad dressing on salad bars at ten local restaurants. Their purpose was to incapacitate voters to change the outcome of a local election in their favor. A larger act of terrorism, one of a different nature, would eventually force policymakers to focus on food defense.

Not even a year had passed since the attack on the World Trade Center when the World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of the WHO, adopted a 2002 resolution expressing serious concern about threats against civilian populations by deliberate use of agents disseminated via food. Later that year, WHO published “Terrorist Threats to Food”-a food safety/food terrorism document for national government policy makers [2]. In the document’s preface, the WHO classifies food safety as an essential element of modern, global public health security.

In their document, WHO focuses on food, food ingredients, and water—in the forms of food ingredients and of bottled water. The organization defines food terrorism as:

“an act or threat of deliberate contamination of food for human consumption with biological, chemical, and physical agents or radionuclear materials for the purpose of causing injury or death to civilian populations and/or disrupting social, economic or political stability.”

In outlining the potential effects of food terrorism, the WHO utilizes data from “unintended” foodborne disease outbreaks to describe the toll of potential disease and death. The document looks at how a single incident of “unintentional contamination” of just one kind of food can infect hundreds of thousands of people with a “serious debilitating disease,” then goes on to extrapolate the effects of some more deliberate and dangerous attack on our food supply.

The impact on trade and the economy is discussed as a “primary motive” for food terrorism. Recalls in American markets of foreign fruits resulted in bankruptcy of international growers and shippers after consumers around the globe shunned such products. The WHO document details specific events in recent history when individual U.S. recalls of domestic ground beef contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7 and lunch meats contaminated with *Listeria* numbered in the 20 millions of pounds of affected product each. When analyzing Consumer Price Index average price data specific for the products and the year of the recalls, one learns that the approximate dollar value loss of these two recalls come in at \$44 million and \$61 million respectively.

Beyond the loss of profit and the closing of businesses and the financial toll on individual countries, however, the WHO uses lessons learned from outbreaks and recalls over the last 20 years to emphasize that foodborne diseases have the potential of causing the disruption of global trade and economic stability and may even impact political stability.

While the WHO published “Terrorist Threats to Food” to provide member governments with guidance on preventing the deliberate contamination of food, some of this document’s main points hold significant meaning for unintentional food problems.

The understanding of those in the food industry of every facet of the food chain, from farm to table, is critical in identifying and preventing failures, defects, and fraud. The horsemeat scandal in Europe shed light on unethical suppliers and the increase in counterfeit food crimes. In the United States, top executives at the Peanut Corporation of America (PCA) knowingly supplied numerous brands with Salmonella contaminated peanut product. Though the long list of guilty verdicts and the lengthy federal prison sentences for the PCA defendants had nothing to do with bioterrorism, their intentional actions in 2008-2009 resulted in nine deaths, illnesses across 46 states (ranging in numbers from over 700 recorded to estimated thousands unrecorded) and far more hospitalizations than the two bioterrorism events discussed previously.

What is the line between an act of bioterrorism, an act of intentional or economically motivated adulteration, and irresponsible corporate actions? For the victims of foodborne illness and their families, the subtle differences in the definitions of these terms can never relieve the forever impact of the true burden of disease.

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