What Can We Expect in Bioterrorism?

A summary of the conversation with Prof. Mark Harrison, University of Oxford
Hosted by Dr. Barbara Lucini, Think Tank Coordinator | 3 November 2026

Why revisit bioterrorism now?

The inaugural MedInt Talk brought historical inquiry into dialogue with medical intelligence, health security and geopolitical risk. Prof. Mark Harrison argued that the small number of recorded biological terrorist attacks should temper alarm. In the figures he presented, a terrorism database recorded 33 such incidents between 1970 and 2019; classification varies across studies. Yet a limited attack can have effects well beyond its direct casualties: fear, costly investigation, interruptions to ordinary life and pressure on public institutions. The question is therefore how an incident might affect society as well as health.

What the historical cases show

The 1984 Rajneeshee incident in Oregon illustrates a pragmatic political motive. Members of the movement contaminated food with Salmonella in an effort to influence a local election. Prof. Harrison reported 751 confirmed cases and no deaths. The outbreak was initially understood as a food safety problem, showing how the cause and intent of an event can remain uncertain. In Britain, the Dark Harvest episode used contaminated soil from Gruinard Island to attract attention to a political grievance. Its main effect was publicity rather than widespread illness.

Aum Shinrikyo pursued biological attacks but failed to achieve the effects it sought. Prof. Harrison used the case to emphasize the practical difficulties of producing an effective attack, even for an organized group. By contrast, the 2001 anthrax letters in the United States caused 22 cases and five deaths, as described in the talk, alongside extensive disruption and public anxiety. He also discussed al-Qaeda’s biological ambitions and the gap between a stated mass casualty objective and a demonstrable operational capability. The cases resist a single profile of perpetrators or motives.

An uncertain and changing threat

Prof. Harrison suggested that easier access to biotechnology and biological knowledge could change what some actors are able to attempt. He placed equal or greater weight on political conditions: polarization, extremist narratives and the possible use of proxies by states. These are prospective judgments, not evidence that a particular group is preparing an attack. He expected most plausible incidents to remain small in scale and comparatively unsophisticated, while stressing that local opportunities, motivations and technical capacity differ.

Scenarios, trust and preparedness

Potential targets and forms of disruption

The talk considered attacks intended to intimidate individuals, disrupt government or industry, or damage agriculture. Prof. Harrison raised the possibility of action against defense related workplaces, technology sectors and universities amid political conflict. He also discussed agricultural harm and economic disruption as possible objectives of hostile actors. These were scenarios for analysis, not claims that the sectors face an imminent biological attack. He cautioned that the boundary between terrorism, sabotage and state directed operations can be difficult to establish, particularly when responsibility is concealed.

Disinformation can multiply the harm

Dr. Barbara Lucini drew attention to disinformation, political extremism and the social setting in which a biological event would be interpreted. Prof. Harrison argued that fear can be manipulated even when the immediate health effects are limited. He recalled the Soviet era campaign falsely claiming that HIV had been created in a United States military laboratory as an example of how a health related narrative can exploit existing distrust. In response to an audience question, he suggested that polarization around COVID 19 measures could provide fertile ground for attempts to intensify suspicion of public authorities after an incident. This does not establish that countries with such polarization are more likely to be attacked.

Questions from the audience

The discussion considered how an incident on the Korean Peninsula might be used in competing political narratives, whether easier access to biotechnology and artificial intelligence changes the balance between lone actors and groups, and how accidental laboratory release compares with deliberate state action. Prof. Harrison viewed lone actors and small groups as important possibilities, without ruling out organized networks. He described large scale biological warfare as unlikely and distinguished it from smaller acts of intimidation or economic damage. Throughout the exchange, uncertainty about intent, responsibility and technical feasibility remained central.

The medical intelligence perspective

For the Think Tank, the conversation points to an integrated task: identify unusual health signals, establish reliable facts, interpret political context and communicate clearly while evidence is incomplete. An effective response must account for both biological harm and the potential erosion of trust. The historical record supports vigilance and proportionate preparation; it cannot, by itself, tell us which scenario will occur next. Dr. Lucini closed the event by inviting continued dialogue across the fields of health, intelligence and international security.

This editorial summary is based on the event transcript.
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