MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
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MP-IDSA
Commentary

Ricin Threat and the Jihadist Conspiracy against India

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November 13, 2025

Summary

Gujarat police's recent seizure of four kg of castor-bean mash, which is used to extract ricin, marks India's first confirmed seizure of the bio-toxin intended for subversive purposes.

The Gujarat Police's Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) on 8 November 2025 arrested Ahmed Mohiyuddin Saiyed, a doctor from Hyderabad (Telangana), along with firearms and nearly 4 kg of castor-bean mash, which is used to extract ricin, a bio-toxin, at Adalaj toll plaza on Ahmedabad–Mehsana Road in Gandhinagar.[1] His call records led to the arrest of two Uttar Pradesh residents, Azad Suleman Sheikh and Mohammad Saleem Khan, in Banaskantha, Gujarat.[2]

Initial investigation indicated that Saiyed had been in contact with one Abu Khadija, a Pakistan-based operative linked to Islamic State-Khurasan Province (ISKP), a transnational jihadist group. Saiyed, a China-trained physician, was manufacturing large quantities of ricin, possibly for mass poisoning. He conducted reconnaissance at several security-sensitive sites in Lucknow, Delhi and Ahmedabad. The Gujarat Ricin plot involved the bio-terror links of radicalised individuals with cross-border operatives. It reflects the ISKP's broader strategy of using skilled individuals for low-cost, high-impact attacks.

International Regulations of 'Scare Chemical'

Ricin (from castor beans/Ricinus communis) remains appealing to extremist groups more for its symbolic and psychological significance than for its actual lethality. Classified by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as a Category B bioterrorism agent[3] and listed under Schedule 1 of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC),[4] ricin is a typical 'bio-chemical toxin' well-known for its high toxicity. Still, it has a low technical barrier for crude extraction from castor beans. Regulatory oversight on ricin control remains strict. Under the CWC, it has no legitimate large-scale use outside of research or defence. The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1540[5] and national laws such as India's Weapons of Mass Destruction Act (2005)[6] also ban the production or possession of any biotoxin by non-state actors.

Even with the regulatory prohibitions in place, terrorists and criminal gangs are drawn to it because of its easy availability, simplicity of processing, and its reputation

[1] **"Doctor with Arms from Pakistan Held for Plotting Ricin Terror Attack"**, *The Times of India*, 10 November 2025.

[2] **"Ricin Poison Terror Plot Busted, Telangana 'Doctor', 2 from UP Arrested: Gujarat ATS"**, *The Indian Express*, 10 November 2025.

[3] Jennifer Audi et al., **"Ricin Poisoning: A Comprehensive Review"**, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 294, No. 18, 2005.

[4] **"Annex on Chemicals: Schedule 1, Toxic Chemicals"**, OPCW.

[5] **"UN Security Council Resolution 1540"**, United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs.

[6] **"The Weapons of Mass Destruction and Their Delivery Systems (Prohibition of Unlawful Activities) Act, 2005"**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 6 June 2005.

as a 'scare chemical'. The toxin's notoriety stems from its use in Cold War assassinations, and its frequent appearance in extremist manuals circulated by Al-Qaeda and ISIS channels. Despite its notoriety, ricin's practical use as a biological or chemical weapon remains very limited. So far, no terrorist group has managed to produce weapon-grade ricin (more than 95 per cent purity). All known plots, from Al-Qaeda's experiments in the early 2000s to the Islamic State's efforts, involved only crude brown mash with less than 5 per cent active toxin, incapable of causing mass harm.

Weaponisation requires not only biochemical expertise but also a Biosafety Level 3 (BSL-3) facility, chromatography purification systems, and reliable aerosol delivery systems. These resources are clearly beyond the reach of most non-state actors, like terrorist groups or criminal organisations. However, an individual scientist or doctor with access to such facilities could potentially develop the biotoxin. Ricin is unstable above 60°C, degrades quickly in moist air, and needs advanced lyophilization to remain viable as an aerosol. Even in small amounts, its spread is inefficient; nearly four tons of aerosolized ricin would be required to match the killing power of just one kilogram of anthrax.

Major Ricin Incidents (1978–2025)

Between 1978 and 2025, over 40 ricin-related plots or incidents have been documented worldwide. However, none have resulted in mass casualties. Ricin's repeated appearance in terror plots highlights its psychological appeal, symbolic power, and accessibility, rather than its practical effectiveness as a weapon of mass destruction. Its continued presence triggers public fear and policy focus, demonstrating the blurry line between fear-driven bioterrorism and actual biochemical warfare potential.

It first gained notoriety during the Cold War when, in 1978, Bulgarian dissident journalist Georgi Markov was assassinated in London with a ricin-laced pellet fired from a modified umbrella. Another Bulgarian dissident survived in a separate ricin incident that year in Paris. Both operations are widely attributed to Russia's KGB and the Bulgarian Secret Service.[7] In the 1980s, the ricin toxin allegedly appeared in Iraq's biological weapons programme, as UNSCOM inspections later confirmed, including missile shells filled with ricin.

The 1990s saw renewed fears after extremist and 'survivalist' groups in the US experimented with crude ricin extraction, including members of the Minnesota

[7] Richard Nelsson, **"The Poison-tipped Umbrella: The Death of Georgi Markov in 1978 – Archive"**, *The Guardian*, 9 September 2020.

Patriots Council, who were the first to be tried and convicted in 1995 under the United States Anti-terrorism Act (1989), for acquiring ricin as part of an alleged plot to kill law enforcement officials.[8] In 2003, ricin re-emerged as a bioterror threat in Europe and the United States. In January 2003, British police uncovered a plot involving ricin, botulinum toxin, and cyanide aimed at causing harm and disruption in the London underground. This conspiracy was linked to a terror cell affiliated with Al Qaeda/Ansar al-Islam in Iraq and Alegria.[9] That same year, letters containing ricin were mailed to the White House and a US postal facility in South Carolina.[10] In 2008, the so-called Las Vegas ricin scare occurred when vials of the toxin were found in a motel room belonging to Roger Bergendorff, with no terror motive confirmed.[11]

The 2013 US ricin letters case involved two people, Shannon Richardson and James Everett Dutschke, who sent ricin-laced letters to then-President Barack Obama and other officials, with no casualties reported.[12] A major jihadist-linked incident occurred in June 2018, when German police arrested a Tunisian Islamic State supporter in Cologne after he produced more than 80 mg of crude ricin and bought 3,000 castor beans online.[13] This was considered the first confirmed case of an Islamic State-directed bio-chemical plot in Europe. However, the toxin was not purified enough to cause any deaths or large-scale disruption. In 2023, authorities in Germany again stopped a ricin and cyanide poisoning plan by an Iranian man suspected of IS ties, confirming the ongoing interest of jihadists in ricin biotoxins.[14] In 2025, also in Germany's Saxony, a teen reported manufacturing and storing several vials of a mixture of ricin and aconitine in his home lab.[15]

India's Vulnerability

Ricin-related terror plots have never occurred in India before. The recent discovery by the Gujarat police marks India's first confirmed seizure of the Ricin toxin intended

[8] J. B. Tucker and J. Pate, "The Minnesota Patriots Council (1991)", in J.B. Tucker (ed.), *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000, pp. 159–183.

[9] **"Mystery Still Surrounds Killer"**, *BBC*, 13 April 2005.

[10] **"Investigation of a Ricin-Containing Envelope at a Postal Facility-South Carolina, 2003"**, *MMWR Weekly*, Vol. 52, No. 46, 21 November 2003.

[11] Animesh Roul, **"Ricin Scare in Las Vegas: Facts and Fiction?"**, Commentary, SSPC, 5 March 2008.

[12] Patrik Jonsson, **"'Walking Dead' Actress Arrested: How Ricin Letters Became Tool of Revenge"**, *CS Monitor*, 8 June 2013.

[13] **"Tunisian Handed Ten Years for Ricin Bomb Plot in Germany"**, *France24*, 26 March 2020.

[14] **"Germany: Man Suspected of Planning 'Serious Act of Violence'"**, *Deutsche Welle*, 8 January 2023.

[15] **"German Police Raid Home of Teenage Boy Suspected of Making Highly Toxic Warfare Agent"**, *CNN*, 17 April 2025.

for subversive activities. Islamic State-linked groups such as ISKP and its Indian sub-unit, Islamic State–Hind Province (ISHP), have long sought chemical or biological terror narratives to showcase operational sophistication. The ricin plot uncovered in Gujarat was detected at the procurement or chemical-processing stages. Persistent surveillance can detect such efforts and flag through forensic monitoring of castor bean purchases or online orders of laboratory solvents.

In India, the widespread availability of the castor plant for various industrial and commercial uses, especially in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, makes raw materials easily accessible. Islamic terror groups see it as an accessible route to 'bioterror', even if only symbolically powerful. India's vulnerability to ricin-inspired plots does not stem from jihadist groups like IS or AQIS easily mastering the complex biochemistry needed to produce and disperse a lethal agent, but from their ability to exploit the toxin's symbolic significance. Ricin's real utility for them lies in targeted violence and disruption, such as assassination attempts on high-profile individuals, deliberate contamination of key urban supply points, or staged discoveries designed to incite widespread panic.

Unlike an attack that can be scaled rapidly, ricin-based operations create a political and media spectacle. A small amount placed visibly or widely publicised can send a strategic message (fear, prestige, disruption) more effectively than the nearly impossible task of producing a stable, weapon-grade aerosol for mass casualties. Therefore, India's risk assessment should focus on detecting, protecting and building resilience around symbolic targets and vital logistics hubs, along with public communication strategies that prevent terror groups from amplifying their messages.

Conclusion

The recent ricin terror plot shows how ideological zeal and pseudo-scientific ambitions continue to drive jihadist experiments in India, even when the results are predictably ineffective. Ricin's appeal isn't based on its actual power but on its symbolic meaning, which can be called a 'bioterror fetish' created through online manuals and Cold War myths. However, with India's advanced surveillance, forensic detection and inter-agency cooperation, the leap from simple toxin to a usable bioweapon remains an uphill task for any non-state actor. No terrorist group in the region, whether ISKP, Lashkar-e-Taiba, AQIS or Khalistani cells, can turn crude ricin into an effective weapon for mass fatality. Ultimately, Ricin functions less as a weapon of mass destruction and more as a tool to generate psychological impact, exposing the dangerous mix of extremist ideology, scientific opportunism and propaganda-driven terrorism.

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