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Global Security Risks: “Soft Targets” Escalating Terrorist Threats Against Hotels and Transportation Systems

The recent July bombings in Jakarta, Indonesia, that killed nine and injured dozens vividly illuminate the vulnerability of luxury hotels in this climate of escalating terrorist threat. The attacks have since been linked to Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asia terrorist network with ties to al Qaeda. In a departure from traditional hotel bombings, the suicide bombers registered at their respective American hotels — the Ritz-Carlton and JW Marriott — assembled the bombs in their rooms and attacked both targets from within. This new twist emphasizes the susceptibility of hotels as viable terrorist targets and the sheer determination of terrorists to thwart hotel security measures.

Hotels are not the only vulnerable points when traveling. Since September 11, 2001, United States authorities have issued several general warnings of possible terrorist attacks on parts of the ground transportation system, including subways, railroad trains and bridges. These concerns have been recently confirmed with the revelations of a self-radicalized American citizen who turned toward jihad, one of a small group of Americans who traveled to Pakistan to train with al Qaeda and had contact with its high-level members. This individual is currently in federal custody and is cooperating with the authorities, revealing discussions with al Qaeda operational planners about a plot to blow up a Long Island Rail Road train inside Pennsylvania Station over Thanksgiving. He also admitted to assisting al Qaeda by providing expert advice derived from specialized knowledge of the New York transit system and the Long Island Rail Road.

In view of the recent hotel bombings in Indonesia and Pakistan — and the additional fact that this summer marks the fourth anniversary of the London transport bombings — this issue of The Lipman Report® will trace the chronology of terrorist attacks on hotels and transportation systems and review some of the security countermeasures that can be implemented to prevent these terrorist acts.

Recent Hotel Terrorism

During June 2009, terrorists attacked the five-star Pearl Continental hotel in Peshawar, Pakistan, killing several people and injuring many more. A vehicle carried an improvised explosive device — believed to be more than a thousand pounds of the plastic explosive C-4 — while another car transported gunmen reportedly

wearing security uniforms, enabling them to slip easily through hotel security. The building was targeted because many foreigners and government officials were on site, and possibly also because the United States government was going to acquire the Pearl Continental to house a new, highly secure American consulate.

The deadly Mumbai attack of November 26, 2008, involved more than ten coordinated shooting and bombing attacks across a range of civilian targets in Mumbai. Among the targets — that included a hospital, cinema, college and Jewish center — were two high-profile hotels: the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower and the Oberoi Trident complex. The handiwork of the Pakistani Taliban, these attacks killed 173 people and wounded over 300 more.

Bin Laden-inspired militants remain active and dangerous, and their group has evolved from the terrorists that struck America so brutally on 9/11. While the core organization is weaker and less capable of a catastrophic attack on American soil than it was eight years ago, the cause it champions is far more popular, and the overall level of anti-American and anti-Western anger is much greater than it was before. Moreover, the lure of al Qaeda's ideology for young Muslims around the globe has been underestimated, a fact that was recently confirmed with the surprising discovery of a group of Islamic militants involved in suicide bombings in Somalia who were found to have emerged out of Minneapolis.

Why Hotels?

Imagine if you were a terrorist operating abroad and planning an attack against a Western target — would you consider targeting an airport, a diplomatic establishment or a brand-name Western hotel? Airports in the post-9/11 era are heavily secured, while the United States Embassy perimeter is guarded by crack local forces and Marines. In contrast, a five-star international hotel is open and easily accessible to the general public. The finest hotels draw foreign executives, large numbers of well-heeled tourists, politicians and celebrities, and are often the main social centers in many cities in the emerging nations. The business model for exclusive hotels demands Western-style amenities with openness and accessibility for visitors and guests, making total security virtually impossible despite security barriers, metal detectors and high-tech surveillance gear.

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The recent twin bombings in Jakarta underscore two tactical trends: the targeting of hotels in terrorist attacks and the use of smaller suicide devices to circumvent physical security measures. Hotels have always been vulnerable from a security standpoint, and there is currently a rising trend for hotels to be targets of attacks. The sheer size of major hotels — with hundreds of rooms, dozens of corners and hallways and many hiding places — renders hotels difficult to protect. Hotels have been attacked by terrorists in Pakistan, Jordan, Egypt, Afghanistan, Mumbai and most recently Peshawar, not to mention the most frequently bombed hotel in the world — the Europa Hotel in Belfast — which was attacked on a regular basis during the “troubles” in Northern Ireland. In short, hotels have become the iconic terrorist target of the past few decades, particularly of the post-9/11 era.

Due to the recent spate of bombings and attacks upon Western-style hotels, some of these upscale lodgings in “hot spots” such as Islamabad, Karachi, Cairo, Kabul, Amman and Sharm el-Sheikh have dramatically upgraded their security. Cars are now checked for bombs before they can enter the grounds, and all guests must pass through metal detectors. Direct access to the hotels is frequently blocked by heavy concrete barriers. Motorists must drive past surveillance cameras and over bomb detectors to get onto the grounds, and paramilitary troops are often deployed in sand bag-protected barriers. Despite recent improvements, however, most hotels are still vulnerable, particularly if terrorists invest considerable time and money developing a plan. The recent terrorist attacks on hotels indicate how challenging, but critical, it is for hotels to find ways to detect, deter and respond to terrorist threats while remaining open and welcoming to clients and the public. While conventional weapons such as explosive devices are a more immediate threat to many hotels, the use of non-conventional weapons — including chemical or biological agents — must be also considered a possible threat. Chemical weapons unleashed in a hotel would certainly be deadly, while a biological attack has the potential to be the most lethal.

What Have We Learned?

Hotels are the consummate soft targets, and terrorists will continue to focus on soft targets that offer high body counts and have iconic value. In some instances, these attacks can have devastating economic

consequences in areas where economies are dependent on tourism, as witnessed in Egypt and the island of Bali with the crippling of the tourist industry. In view of this obvious trend to target the hospitality industry, hotels should adopt a robust security strategy encompassing prevention, protection and response to enhance vigilance, resilience and preparedness in dealing with terrorist attacks.

To accomplish this, hotels should ensure there is a formal education and awareness training program to keep all staff abreast of changing threat conditions. Hotels should also encourage and train personnel to remain alert and immediately report any situation that appears suspicious. To deter and detect pre-operational surveillances by terrorists, it is vital to leave no stone unturned; all members of the hotel staff from the bottom to the top should be trained and on guard, as hotel security personnel are limited in number. The staff should be looking out for suspicious persons, activities, packages, devices and materials. The housekeeping department in particular can play a very significant role in the prevention of any terrorist attack, simply by keeping its eyes open and reporting anything that looks amiss in rooms, hallways or public areas. The hotel staff should also be familiar with the dangers of handling unsolicited mail, deliveries and devices.

Other key steps hotels should take include:

- Coordinating with law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement should have architectural designs and blueprints of hotel premises.
- Ensuring that the staff is properly vetted to prevent inside assistance to the terrorists, as may have occurred in Mumbai and Peshawar.
- Arranging external barriers — such as planters and bollards — to increase “stand-off distances.” The potency of a blast wave decreases in direct proportion to the distance between the bomb and the target. The further away vehicles containing bombs are from hotels, the less damage there will be from an explosion.
- Installing CCTV cameras to keep adjacent areas under general surveillance, prohibiting illegal parking and conducting security patrols to deter and detect suspicious activities, vehicles and persons.
- Instituting thorough staff and vehicle checks by trained security personnel.

- Periodically checking all fire protection systems and conducting regular evacuation drills.
- Strengthening construction of existing buildings where possible to resist collapse from an explosion and to help safeguard emergency evacuation routes.
- Upgrading existing emergency response systems in the event of release of chemical, biological or radiological agents and enhancing the monitoring of air and water supply for chemicals.
- Keeping fresh air intakes, HVAC/AHU rooms and water tanks out of easy access and under round-the-clock CCTV surveillance.
- Ensuring back-up communication systems are available to facilitate response in the event of crisis situations.
- Protecting against hazardous glass fragments resulting from detonation of explosive devices. Techniques such as films and glazing can render the fragments less dangerous.

Hotels should prepare detailed response plans and procedures for the whole range of potential security incidents, from the detonation of explosive devices to the release of toxic and harmful biological and chemical materials. They should also update and periodically test comprehensive disaster recovery and business continuity plans. Unfortunately, there is constant tension between hotel security managers and hotel guest relations managers over how much security is required in a specific city. However, the lure of hotels as targets is unlikely to change in the near future as terrorists continue to focus on soft targets. Strategic and immediate steps must be taken to minimize risk.

Ground Transportation: Another Target for Terrorism

Unlike airlines, where security checkpoints carefully screen passengers and luggage, mass transit options that people use for their daily commutes are designed to be readily accessible and are therefore infinitely harder to protect. Since September 11, the al Qaeda network has targeted transportation systems outside of the United States, due to their logistical advantages and exploitable vulnerabilities. The most recent incidents include the March 2004 al Qaeda bombings of rush hour trains in Madrid that killed 191 people, the July 2005 London tube bombings — in which three subways and one bus were bombed, killing more than 50 individuals — and the July 2006 attacks on Mumbai's commuter train that felled more than 200. Transportation terrorism is

widespread around the globe; Palestinian suicide bombers have repeatedly blown up buses in Israel and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) has frequently attacked the London Underground and British passenger trains. In the mid-1990s, Algerian extremists from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) set off bombs in the Paris subway, while Chechen militants bombed the metro system in Moscow and successfully sent suicide bombers onto planes. In the United States, terrorists linked to al Qaeda planned to detonate truck bombs in New York City's commuter tunnels and bridges in 1993, while other Islamist terrorists plotted suicide bombings in New York subways in 1997. The first attack on public transportation involving weapons of mass destruction occurred in 1995, when the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas — a toxic nerve agent — into the Tokyo subway system, killing 12 people and sending more than 5,000 to the hospital.

The most likely sort of attack on American subways or buses would involve conventional bombs, such as the one planned for Thanksgiving in the thwarted plot recently discovered in New York. The materials and know-how are readily available. Suicide bombings like those that have targeted Israeli buses are also a possibility. Less likely but far more devastating scenarios involve the release of a chemical agent such as sarin gas or biological agents such as anthrax or smallpox into a subway system. In yet another frightening possibility, terrorists could derail a passenger train or blow up a bridge or tunnel, killing many people and crippling a city's infrastructure for months or even years. Ground transportation systems, which often include enclosed spaces packed with people, could also prove tempting targets for terrorists. And while all modes of transportation are vulnerable to terrorism, it is important to remember that they can also serve as means of conveyance to terrorists planning and executing an attack.

Biological or chemical attacks in subways would be particularly dangerous because subway systems have relatively small enclosed areas that — like hotels — become packed with people at predictable times during the day. Air currents above ground, as well as those generated by the movement of trains through the tunnels, could spread germs or gases throughout a subway station and through ventilation systems to the streets above, leading to the infection of large numbers

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of people. Even more worrisome, symptoms of exposure to some biological agents, such as the highly contagious smallpox virus, might not appear for a couple of days — long after victims had left the station and unknowingly infected many others. In the 1960s, the CIA and the U.S. Army conducted a test in which light bulbs filled with microscopic particles were dropped into the New York subway system to measure the possible effects of a biological attack. The study revealed that a similar type of attack using a deadly disease agent such as tularemia — a highly infectious bacteria — would have infected as many as three million people, most of them above ground.

Although it is possible to carry out a biological or chemical attack in a subway system, it is far more challenging to do so than to use conventional explosives. Anthrax and especially smallpox are very difficult to obtain, and special scientific and technical skills are needed to disseminate them effectively as a weapon. The same is true for deadly chemicals such as sarin or VX. Even Aum Shinrikyo, which had money, scientific expertise and professional-grade labs, did not kill large numbers of people in its attack on the Tokyo subway.

Countermeasures

Metropolitan transit agencies around the world have increased both undercover and high-profile police patrols and refined their emergency response plans to include terrorism. In many systems, subway trash receptacles are being replaced with bomb-resistant cases and are checked periodically. Some agencies have also conducted smoke tests to study airflows within the subway system and have installed chemical detectors to provide early warning of an attack. In the Moscow metro system, passengers can expect to be randomly frisked with a wand that searches for concealed explosives. In New York, suspicious packages are now regularly investigated and x-rayed, while passengers' bags are subject to random searches. However, bringing airline-style security to American subways would be virtually impossible, and most of the above measures would be largely useless against suicide bombers.

Beyond the immediate casualties, transit terrorism could cause great harm to society if individuals respond to attacks by shifting from public transit to statistically less safe modes of travel such as driving. It is

understandably difficult for people to ignore the fear generated by a terrorist attack; such attacks are designed to be highly visible, producing intense media coverage. The fact that the harm they cause is intentional rather than accidental makes them particularly tragic and frustrating. Unlike accidents, terrorist attacks also raise fears that more such events may follow.

The federal government spent \$22 billion — more than nine dollars per passenger — on air transportation security after the 9/11 attacks, but less than one cent per passenger to increase railway and subway security. Transit terrorism is a serious threat that harms people both directly, through injury and property damage, and indirectly by creating fear and confusion. Strong action is necessary to protect transit users' safety and sense of security.

In this age of terrorism, we cannot afford to become complacent if we wish to protect hotels and transportation systems. It is of paramount importance to constantly assess what can be improved upon, and prepared against, as terrorism presents an increasingly wider spectrum of threats. We cannot predict with scientific accuracy when the next attack will occur or who will be the next target, but we should do everything possible to minimize our risks by reducing the opportunity for terrorists to carry out successful attacks. It will involve costs — both for government agencies and for private companies — but the question should not be whether we can afford the costs of prevention, but whether in the long run we can afford to do nothing. The traveling public also has a responsibility, not only to look out for its own personal security but to maintain a heightened state of awareness and to notify security personnel immediately of any unusual activity. As we have seen with some of the thwarted attacks over the past few years, many of these tragic events can be prevented or minimized through strategic preventative measures combined with simple vigilance. The time for urgency is now.®



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