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Suicide Bombers An Impending Threat to the United States

Almost every day, the media reports another suicide bombing and its aftermath somewhere in the world. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto by a suicide bomber in late December is another example of the political mayhem resulting from these events, which followed the suicide bombing in Lahore upon her return from India in October. In another ominous development, in January 2008, Spanish police and intelligence agents arrested 14 men and raided several apartments, mosques and businesses in Barcelona, Spain. The arrested individuals included twelve Pakistanis, an Indian and a Bangladeshi, all belonging to a well-organized group that had gone beyond "radicalization." Information has surfaced that this group is connected to Tabligh Jamaat, a Pakistani-based group suspected by Western intelligence agencies of recruiting jihadists. The arrests and the ensuing raids allowed the Spanish police to discover a sufficient amount of bombing paraphernalia and information indicating this group was preparing to launch a wave of terror, including suicide bombings in Spain and throughout Western Europe.

For more than 25 years, terrorist groups have increasingly relied on suicide attacks to achieve major political objectives. The raw number of suicide attacks is climbing worldwide while, at the same time, terrorist incidents of all types outside of Iraq have declined by nearly half. Perhaps most worrying of all, suicide terrorism has become the most deadly form of terrorism. Even if the immense losses of 9/11 are not counted, suicide attacks amount to just three percent of all terrorist incidents from 1980 through 2003, but account for 48 percent of all fatalities, making the average suicide terrorist attack 12 times deadlier than other forms of terrorism. This issue of The Lipman Report[®] will examine this recent phenomenon, review its historical roots, attempt to identify the groups and profiles of the individuals involved in this activity and discuss the likelihood of this form of terrorism occurring again in the United States.

The roots of suicide bombers

Historically, terrorism evolved as a weapon that a weaker state uses when it is being threatened or occupied by a much stronger nation. This power asymmetry virtually rules out conventional military confrontation because the weaker state does not have the

resources to train, arm or equip sufficiently large military formations. Since the resistance fighters are often too weak to confront their enemy directly or militarily, they aim to gradually wear down their adversary by fighting in small units dispersed over large areas in order to steadily inflict losses over a protracted period of time. As a result, the line between isolated and easily targeted combatants and noncombatants is blurred. When the resistance fails to succeed, they often choose to escalate rather than quit, and noncombatants increasingly become the victims.

Over the past 25 years, suicide terrorism has frequently become the choice for groups that choose to escalate a confrontation. Strong evidence suggests that leaders of terrorist groups view the offensive use of suicide attacks as a means to compensate for the relative military weakness of their groups compared to their opponents. To a certain extent, a suicide bomber is the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of terrorism since it is the most aggressive form of terrorism. What distinguishes a suicide terrorist is that the attacker does not expect to survive the mission and often employs a method of attack such as a car or truck bomb, suicide vest or flying an airplane into a building. This requires his or her death in order to succeed; in essence, suicide terrorists kill others while killing themselves. In the worst imaginable example of this tactic, al Qaeda used two mentally impaired women as human bombs, killing approximately 100 noncombatants in a pet market in Baghdad in February 2008. The insurgents have shifted tactics because increased checkpoints and roadblocks have made it more difficult to detonate car bombs that previously killed larger numbers of people.

Historical background

Suicide terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Ancients like the Zealots in the Roman Era and the Assassins of the Middle Ages, to the more recent Kamikazes and Viet Cong have proven their willingness to perish while pursuing their political goals. The modern expressions of the suicide terrorism phenomenon surfaced with the appearance of the first suicide terrorists in Lebanon, more than 25 years ago. Suicide attacks began in Lebanon in 1983 at the instigation of Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shiite terror organization that carried out successful suicide attacks against the U.S. Embassy in

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Beirut, while simultaneous truck bombings killed 241 U.S. Marines and 58 French paratroopers. Terrorist groups carried out about 50 additional suicide attacks before U.S. troops left Lebanon five months later. In light of the withdrawal of foreign troops from Lebanon, the suicide attacks garnered considerable prestige for the perpetrators and their organizations. The suicide bomber became a symbol of martyrdom and a source of inspiration for terrorist organizations worldwide. Hezbollah's successes consumed Western leaders for months and encouraged terrorist groups such as Hamas, the Tamil Tigers and al Qaeda to adopt this method.

In the 1990s, suicide terrorism spread to additional countries. During 1990, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam began a series of suicide attacks against Sri Lankan political leaders, military targets and civilians and used a suicide attacker to kill former prime minister of India Rajiv Gandhi. Suicide terrorism also spread to Israel in 1994, when the Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad began using suicide attacks against Israeli civilians and troops; to the Persian Gulf in 1995, when al Qaeda initiated suicide attacks against American military targets in the region and to Turkey in 1996, when the Kurdish Workers Party began suicide attacks against Turkish military and government targets. Al Qaeda escalated its operations with the most spectacular suicide attack in history, the direct attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. These successes have undoubtedly abetted the spread of this phenomenon.

Modern suicide attacks are defined as violent, motivated actions executed by individuals who knowingly, actively and with prior intent kill themselves while destroying their chosen civilian or military targets. Terrorist groups often choose this tactic because it is relatively easy to control, inexpensive and causes psychological and physical damage to the target. What made these recent actions unprecedented was their scale; an individual could kill scores, if not hundreds of people, by driving cars or trucks filled with explosives into a crowd. After 1983, many terrorist groups adapted the concept by giving bombers explosives to carry on their bodies. The resulting bombings were smaller, though more precise, allowing the bomber to become a guided

human missile. More recently, al Qaeda perfected this tactic by utilizing suicide bombers in cars, trucks, boats and planes to attack American targets in Africa, the Middle East and on the American homeland.

Who are the suicide bombers?

Presumably all terrorists know the dangers they run, accept them as an occupational hazard, and may even consider these dangers an attraction, not a deterrent. But only a few terrorists use their own deaths as a means of terrorizing others. They seem to be a breed apart, with which the rest of humanity can have little in common. Certainly they sow panic more effectively than other terrorists. Those who leave bombs in public places and then depart, despicable as they are, presumably still have attachments to their own lives and therefore may be open to discussion or negotiation. By contrast, it is more difficult to deter someone who is prepared to kill oneself to advance his or her cause, and who considers self-annihilation while killing as many strangers as possible a duty, an honor and a merit that will win ample rewards in the hereafter. As an added incentive, the parent terror organization will often promise to provide monetary aid to the suicide bomber's family.

Until now, most people have thought that suicide terrorists are almost entirely teenage boys who, because of their inexperience and youthful impulsiveness, are easily convinced by a charismatic leader with a religious message. The facts present a different picture. In fact, suicide terrorists are more normal than many of us would like to believe. Few suicide bombers are social misfits or criminally insane. Most fit a nearly opposite profile: typically they are psychologically healthy, have better than average economic prospects in their communities, are deeply integrated into social networks and are emotionally attracted to their national communities. The bottom line is that suicide attackers are not primarily poor, uneducated, immature religious zealots or socially inept. Recent studies show that the suicide attackers have been educated and uneducated, married and single, men and women, isolated and socially integrated and range from age 15 to 52. Additionally, research has determined that suicide bombers are overwhelmingly walk-in volunteers, not long-time members of terrorist groups.

Since Islamic fundamentalism is associated with about half of the suicide attacks that have occurred during the past 25 years, suicide bombers are increasingly connected to the Sunni fundamentalism of al Qaeda. However, the use of multiple suicide attackers is an al Qaeda trademark and not all suicide terrorism is an overwhelmingly religious phenomenon. Some see themselves as sacrificing their lives for their nation or their communities' good. Many, perhaps most, suicide terrorists fit the paradigm of altruistic suicide, at least from the point of view of those who support terrorism to further their political or religious cause. From everyone else's point of view, suicide attacks are murders.

What motivates the suicide bomber?

Since many attacks, including those of 9/11, have been perpetrated by Muslim terrorists professing religious motives, it may seem obvious that Islamic fundamentalism is the primary cause. Although religious motives may matter and Islamic groups receive the most attention in the Western media, modern suicide terrorism is not limited to Islamic fundamentalism. Many cite a history of exploitation by Western powers, Israel's existence, government oppression, poverty, lack of education, foreign occupation and alienation as reasons why individuals decide to kill themselves in order to murder others. However, since America's declared enemy at this time is al Qaeda, the religious aspects are imperative. Suicide attacks disappeared from the world scene between 1945 and 1980. During this period, not a single recorded instance of a suicide terrorist exists. During the past 25 years, suicide bombings steadily increased because of two reasons: the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the successes of suicide terrorists. Suicide terrorism is a strategy of coercion—a means to compel a target government to change policy. In fact, the target state of every modern suicide campaign has been a democracy.

The 9/11 suicide attacks sparked significant debate in the Islamic world about the merits of suicide attacks. Many Islamists are unapologetic about violent jihad and use theological interpretations to justify terrorism, suicide bombings and beheadings. Today, al Qaeda splinter and successor groups and their fellow travelers use the writings of Islamic scholars who supported the violent jihad of seventh century Islam and the theological writings of more modern Islamic

scholars connected with the Muslim Brotherhood to justify al Qaeda's use of suicide bombers.

Why are suicide bombers so difficult to thwart?

The world has witnessed an increasing number of suicide bombings for a simple reason: it is the most efficient form of violence at short range. Suicide bombers operate differently, making them more dangerous. They do not draw attention to themselves, which allows them to find a pathway around security barriers created to identify violent stereotypes. They never threaten their enemies. The secret of their tactic is not to perform it as violence, until the very last second when they detonate the bomb. The advantage of the suicide bomber is to approach as if nothing unusual were happening. There is no confrontational tension because the bomber acts as if there is no confrontation. It succeeds only because the attacker is good at pretending that he or she is not threatening at all. Mild-mannered middle class people make ideal suicide bombers, since they are not confrontational by nature and do not have to control a threatening demeanor that would warn their victims. These are efficient characteristics for carrying a bomb under one's clothing until the target is so close that massive damage is certain.

Are suicide bombers a threat to the homeland?

The al Qaeda organization purports to address all Muslim grievances, which they believe can only be redressed through the spectacular humiliation of America and its allies, wherever and whenever possible. Therefore, if any Muslim lands are occupied, if any Muslim is oppressed and it can be shown on television and communicated over the Internet, mobilization for another 9/11 is a distinct possibility.

While addressing a Senate panel in February 2008, the director of national intelligence reported that al Qaeda is gaining strength from its refuge in Pakistan and is increasing its ability to recruit, train and position operatives with the capability of carrying out attacks inside the United States. Currently al Qaeda has three tiers: Hard-core terrorists who are trying to reconstitute an organization in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq; loosely affiliated groups located in Europe and self-radicalized cells springing up in America. These potential recruits surf the Internet to

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communicate with and influence sympathetic people around the world. As a result, the scourge of suicide bombings has spread both east and west from their origins in the Middle East.

Since 2002, al Qaeda has carried out more suicide bombings and killed more people than in all the years prior to 9/11. The ability of al Qaeda to attack is stronger today than before 2001, although the total element of surprise is gone. In addition, in a disturbing trend, an increasing number of suicide bombers come from European Union countries, particularly Britain. The 2005 bombings in London and Jordan are examples of the potential spread of this tactic. Since the individuals in the United Kingdom were British citizens and the individuals in Jordan were traveling on forged passports, under current travel requirements, they could have traveled virtually anywhere in Europe or North America to carry out their mission.

The recent arrests in Spain again exhibit the international threat. The Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) group has come up before in connection with terrorism plots, including the September 2002 Lackawanna Six case in the United States, the October 2002 Portland Seven, the August 2006 plot to bomb airliners en route from London to the United States, the July 7, 2005 London Underground bombings and the July 7, 2007 attempted bombings in London and Glasgow, Scotland. Although TJ is not an intentional propagator of terrorism, experts contend that the organization unintentionally serves as a front, or conduit to, militant organizations such as al Qaeda. Organizations like TJ pose a serious quandary for western counter-intelligence services operating in democracies.

While the FBI Director is concerned about al Qaeda groups in Europe and self-radicalized groups springing up in America, the increase in what is referred to as "home-grown" terrorism in Europe now creates one of the largest threats to American security. The U.S. Homeland Security Secretary explained that the plots and attacks in Europe during the past several years have made the United States recognize the "real risk that Europe will become a platform for terrorists." It is not an accident that 15 of the 19 9/11 suicide

bombers were Saudis, because at that time it was relatively easy for Saudis to obtain visas to enter the United States. While it is more difficult for Saudis to obtain visas at this time, most citizens of the European Union can enter the United States without visas.

Al Qaeda has been attempting to attack the United States for the past 15 years. In 1993, they attacked the World Trade Center and, eight years later, carried out a much more successful attack on September 11, 2001. Now, almost seven years later, the threat of another attack is once again a real possibility. In addition, the likelihood of suicide terrorists using car bombs, truck bombs or individuals on American soil is increasing and we cannot reverse the underlying causes quickly. For this reason, it is crucial to tighten the borders and immigration controls, while continuing to use offensive military action against al Qaeda terrorists. Since the private sector plays a large role in the defense of the United States, all prudent and reasonable steps should be undertaken to minimize vulnerabilities. With 85 percent of America's critical infrastructure in the hands of the private sector, it is imperative that the private sector supports the strategic efforts of the federal authorities while diligently providing for the safety and security of its personnel and facilities. Twenty years ago, most public and private entities had hazard-specific plans; however, it is now understood that an all-hazard approach is more comprehensive in assessing major disaster situations. Such an approach installs countermeasures to prevent the daily challenges of crime such as pilfering, workplace violence, weather-related extremes and pandemics and puts an enterprise in an excellent position to protect both the personnel and the facilities from a terrorist attack. Given the circumstances, it is vital that the private sector review its approach to security to prevent suicide terrorists from wreaking havoc in the United States. The time for urgency is now.®



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