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Growing Threats and Potential Suicide Attacks Demand an Increased Vigilance in United States

Suicide bombers continue to cause carnage and devastation in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. During the past several months, they have killed more than 800 people in bombings in Pakistan alone, and this free moving jihad is galvanizing conflicts on a worldwide scale. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq continue to experience the greatest threat from suicide attacks, but during the past five years this movement has been inexorably moving westward until Europe is at risk and North America is threatened. These affiliated and homegrown derivatives of al Qaeda are also moving from conventional weapons to a wider range of exotic weapons while mobilizing support on the Internet. A recent report revealed a top al Qaeda expert on biological weapons, Abu Khabab, who was reportedly killed in a U.S. air strike in 2006 is alive and in charge of resurrecting Al Qaeda's program to develop or obtain weapons of mass destruction. It is believed the terrorist group has renewed some of its research effort to develop or obtain chemical, biological, radiological and even nuclear weapons.

The chemical effort is currently focused on developing and using cyanide, chlorine and other such poisons. The report further indicated Khabab is believed to have set up rudimentary labs for al Qaeda scientists, and more ominously, is training western recruits for chemical attacks in Europe and perhaps the United States. This complex of labs is similar to his "Khabab Camp" in al Qaeda's sprawling Darunta training complex in Afghanistan's Tora Bora region before the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. It is widely assumed in the intelligence community that al Qaeda has developed chemical weapons and that if it doesn't have biological capabilities already, "they are certainly not far from it."

This issue of The Lipman Report[®] will examine the growing threat of suicide bombers to the American homeland. It will also provide suggestions regarding what should be done by Americans working together through a civil defense program and enhanced awareness of the dangers to prevent such a terrible disaster from occurring.

The growing threat

In view of the successes attributed to the latest surge in suicide bombings by al Qaeda operatives, it is logical to assume that al Qaeda strategists have given consideration to the use of suicide bombers armed with weapons of mass destruction.

This "worst case scenario" evokes the recent assassination of one of the world's most wanted and elusive terrorists, Imad Mughniyeh, who was killed in a car bombing in Syria nearly 15 years after dropping from sight. Mughniyeh could be identified as a master of the suicide attack. He is accused of masterminding the first major suicide bombing that targeted Americans: the April 1983 car bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut that killed 63 people, including 17 Americans. He is also blamed for a more devastating attack six months later, when suicide attackers detonated truck bombs at the barracks of French and U.S. peacekeeping forces in Beirut, killing 59 French paratroopers and 241 American Marines. The one-time Hezbollah security chief was the suspected mastermind of later attacks that killed hundreds of Americans and of the brutal kidnappings of Westerners. Mughniyeh's death will likely bring repercussions from Hezbollah, a Shiite terrorist group in some ways similar to al Qaeda, who currently blames Israel and the United States for this assassination. In the past, Hezbollah has taken its time planning its responses and has struck in unexpected places. For example, in 1992 they attacked Israeli targets in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Hezbollah is a global organization with capable assets in many places and will strike where security is the weakest. Reportedly, the perpetrator of the recent suicide attack on March 7, 2008 at a Jewish seminary in Jerusalem, killing eight students, has been identified by Israeli authorities as a member of Hezbollah.

Nonetheless, al Qaeda remains the preeminent terrorist threat to the United States at home and abroad. Al Qaeda has been able to regenerate many of its key capabilities, and that includes the top leadership, operational lieutenants, and, most importantly, a de facto safe haven in Pakistan's border area with Afghanistan known as the Federally

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Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Its activities in Pakistan have heightened domestic political tension in a Muslim nation with nuclear weapons. This tension was exacerbated by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto by a suicide bomber. Al Qaeda affiliates also pose a significant threat. Al Qaeda in Iraq remains the central, most capable affiliate and could deploy its resources for attacks outside of Iraq, as witnessed in Jordan last year. Al Qaeda's affiliate in North Africa, known as al Qaeda in the lands of the Islamic Meghreb, is active in North Africa and is expanding its target set to include U.S. and Western interests. Other al Qaeda affiliates in the Levant, the Gulf, Africa and Southeast Asia are still capable of executing attacks against U.S. interests.

A new influx of Western recruits, including American citizens, is being trained in al Qaeda camps in Pakistan. These recruits would be able to more easily enter and move about the United States than foreign operatives. However, the principal threat from terrorism within the United States is self-radicalized individuals with no contact with any foreign terrorist leaders. The FBI arrested the members of two such groups last year, one intent on attacking the John F. Kennedy airport, the other plotting against New Jersey's Fort Dix. Europe has been the scene of the most recent attacks by individuals associated with the core al Qaeda group, such as the bombs that hit the London transport network in July 2005, the airline plot in 2006 and the thwarted bombing attempts in London and Glasgow last year. Indeed a new frontline has opened up in Europe after the London and Madrid bombings and other thwarted attempts including the recent arrests of 14 individuals in Barcelona, Spain who were planning a reign of terror throughout Europe. A primary concern is that these events in Europe are one plane ticket away from occurring in the United States, since citizens from most European Union members are not required to obtain a visa to travel to the U.S. Security officials and experts outside the government have long been concerned that a few western recruits could give al Qaeda a flexibility that has eluded it so far—terrorists with U.S. passports who will be able to easily melt into American society. To date, American intelligence and security agencies have found this terrorist group difficult to infiltrate due to its cellular structure and its reliance on natives from Islamic lands. If al Qaeda is opening its

doors to Westerners, it could potentially be more vulnerable to penetration by western spies.

Radicalization of jihadists

Al Qaeda has evolved from the organization headed by Osama bin Laden into an amorphous movement, a "leaderless jihad." Most of today's suicide bombers have little or no link with the original al Qaeda, but are part of a broader, more amorphous phenomenon that one expert calls the "al Qaeda social movement." It is a mutual attraction of freelance jihadists, outraged by recent events in Muslim lands and increasingly mobilized online. This is a very worrisome development. Why well-educated young men from middle-class backgrounds, often with a secular education and wives and children, become suicide bombers is difficult to understand. Experts suggest that radicalization is a collective rather than an individual process in which friendship and kinship are key components. The process has four stages. The initial trigger is a sense of moral outrage, usually regarding some incident of Muslim suffering in Iraq, Palestine, Chechnya or elsewhere. This acquires a broader context, becoming a "morality play" in which Islam and the West are seen to be at war. In stage three, the global and local are fused, as geopolitical grievance resonates with personal experience of discrimination or joblessness. Finally the individual joins a terrorist cell, which becomes a surrogate family, nurturing the jihadist world-view and preparing the initiate for martyrdom. Many fundamentalist Muslims pass through the first three stages; only a few take the final step.

In view of the previously discussed bad news such as a regenerated al Qaeda preparing to attack western targets with self-radicalized fanatics possibly carrying weapons of mass destruction prepared by a resurrected Abu Khabab, and possibly an act of vengeance on behalf of the recently departed Mr. Mughniyeh, the United States must act immediately to ensure the safety of its civilians. Although an extreme and unlikely scenario in the near future, prudence dictates that reasonable steps, similar to the Civil Defense program of the 20th century, be taken to protect the homeland and the infrastructure from another devastating attack such as occurred on September 11, 2001.

The need for civil defense and American resilience

Since the end of the Cold War, civil defense has fallen into disuse within the United States. The downfall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the world's only superpower have minimized the threat of a military attack on America. Gradually, the focus of a nuclear war shifted to an "all-hazards" approach of Comprehensive Emergency Management. The more general intent is to protect the civilian population in times of peace as well as in times of war. Natural disasters and the emergence of new threats such as terrorism have caused attention to be focused away from traditional civil defense and into new forms of civilian protection such as emergency management and homeland security. This new concept is described using a number of terms such as Crisis Management, Emergency Management, Emergency Preparedness or Contingency Planning.

Federal emergency management has existed in the United States for over 200 years. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is an agency of the recently established United States Department of Homeland Security. The purpose of FEMA is to coordinate the response to a disaster occurring in the United States that overwhelms the resources of state and local authorities. In consideration of the new threat from a more dangerous form of terrorism that has escalated into a war, prudent steps must be implemented to strengthen the concept of civil defense. Some experts think the United States is still vulnerable and question the readiness of the nation to prevent, protect and respond to another catastrophe due to a lack of preparedness and resources. All levels of government must fulfill their responsibilities to provide for the protection and welfare of the population as occurred during the dark days of World War II and the Cold War when Civil Defense was a real concern because of the possibility of a nuclear war. A recent example of federal efforts to combat terrorism on the soil of the United States has been the tightening of the passport and visa regime in view of the fact that more than a dozen people with suspected terrorist links have attempted to enter the United States from Canada since the September 11, 2001 attacks. Additionally, a key U.S. Senate leader recently vowed to strengthen National Guard capabilities to respond to terrorist WMD attacks following a scathing assessment of the

Guard by an independent commission. Amtrak and the New York subway system will also begin to increase their visible security measures in view of information indicating al Qaeda elements in Europe were planning to bomb transportation targets as occurred in Madrid, London and Mumbai.

Since the major share of the United States' critical infrastructure is in the hands of the private sector, it has the responsibility to protect facilities and personnel. Lastly, the individual also has a responsibility to be prepared and responsive to the potential of a terrorist attack.

The potential of suicide bombers in the United States and likely targets

Americans have been slow to recognize the potential threat of suicide bombings in the United States for several reasons. First, the concept of committing suicide for an ideal, a principle or a belief system is alien to English-speaking cultures. Further, many in the United States have lapsed into complacency. Suicide bombings on foot and in vehicles have thus far been carried out in other parts of the world, leading Americans to have a false sense of security in the assumption that "it will not happen here." Of course, the 9/11 attacks were suicide missions. The New York Police Department recently released a study indicating the assimilation theory of immigration mitigating the potential for homegrown terrorism is no longer a safe assumption. In addition, recent developments worldwide have made suicide bombings in the United States seem far more likely than in the past. Add to all this the fact that the United States is in the midst of an election year, which is an opportune time for carrying out terrorist attacks. In light of all this, the potential for suicide bombings on American soil cannot, and must not, be ignored.

Since chlorine is often mentioned as a popular ingredient in chemical weapons, it is interesting to note that the New York Police Department (NYPD) found last year that it would seemingly be easy for anyone to purchase chlorine to use in a terrorist attack. The NYPD established a fake water purification company and was able to make an online purchase of three 100-

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pound containers of chlorine, which can be lethal when airborne. The supplier never asked for identification, and the transaction involved minimal person-to-person interaction. The point of the test was "to assess the ease or difficulty with which a terrorist in the United States could acquire large quantities of chlorine without being detected by law enforcement or intelligence agencies." At present, few, if any, barriers stand in the way. Current commercial rules do not require the reporting of chlorine sales or that the buyers are identified by the vendor. Obviously, this area needs a lot of regulation similar to the reforms implemented regarding the acquisition of fertilizer after the Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh in 1995 when large quantities of fertilizer were used in a devastating truck bomb. In view of the above NYPD operation, one wonders if other lethal chemicals are easily available without detection.

While any facility has the potential for attack by suicide bombers, some facilities are more likely targets than others, especially if they exhibit security vulnerabilities. Military and government facilities and financial institutions such as stock exchanges, banks, credit unions and lending institutions all remain at high risk. Critical infrastructure entities, without which the society cannot function normally, such as mass transit systems; public utilities; gas and oil storage and delivery companies; refineries and communication systems are also top priorities to protect. In addition, public venues such as schools, healthcare facilities and places of public assembly, such as houses of worship, sports arenas, entertainment and tourism facilities, shopping malls and open markets are all high traffic areas and vulnerable to the possibility of suicide bombers.

Terrorism and the all-hazards approach

The theory is that an all-hazards plan can provide a basic framework for responding to a wide variety of disasters. However, terrorism is a hazard of uncertain probability for most communities and organizations, posing the question whether terrorism is so different from other threats that the all-hazards approach is ineffective. What the all-hazards approach can

contribute to the overall security effort is a basic framework for structuring the emergency response, preparing for the response and recovering from attacks, as well as developing appropriate measures to prevent or reduce the impact of the attacks. The risk of earthquakes in California or hurricanes in Florida is more certain than the probability of a terrorist attack; consequently, investments to deal with risks to life and property should be based on priorities. For private firms, unless they are the likely targets of terrorists or are located adjacent to such a target, the biggest threat may be workplace violence. Physical security, ranging from locked doors and closed circuit television systems to security officers and employee identification cards, can address a variety of threats. In short, precautions to deal with criminal intruders, disgruntled employees, angry spouses, and enraged clients can also serve as a foundation for an antiterrorism program. As an added challenge for all those entrusted with security responsibilities in a precarious environment, violent crime continues to rise and is now exacerbated by the difficult economic situation. All-hazards planning targets both violent crime and suicide bombing in communities by encouraging a broader perspective on risks and how to deal with them. It also provides a strong foundation on which to build effective programs to manage hazards and disasters.

The role of security professionals in thwarting potential acts of terrorism can be summed up this way: Always assume that someone, somewhere, may be plotting against your facility. Never think "it would never happen here." Your knowledge and awareness of the threat, coupled with vigilance and diligence in applying what you know, may one day be the key to preventing a suicide attack at your facility. The time for urgency is now.



The Lipman Report Editors