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Suicide bombings

Terrorist tactic poses potential threat within the United States

Four suicide car bombers detonate their payload in central Baghdad, Iraq. Southeast of the city, insurgents set off a roadside bomb; when police arrive, two suicide bombers drive in from different directions and detonate. Another suicide bomber sets off an ambulance packed with explosives northeast of Baghdad, where in another incident, a Sunni cleric believed affiliated with an Iraqi Al Qaeda wing heaves one grenade at troops as they surround his mosque and blows himself up with another. The death toll: at least 27, with dozens wounded. These attacks occurred within just a few hours on April 29, 2005, the day after Iraq's first freely elected government was approved. Repeat attacks in the days that followed produced approximately 300 casualties — including 200 prospective police recruits and members of Iraqi security forces.

The cynical might call these incidents “just another day” in Iraq where, even as thousands of U.S. troops work to keep the peace and train Iraqi soldiers, insurgents continue to ply their deadly trade. The coordination and widespread impact of these attacks illustrate the difficulty in identifying suicide bombers and stopping them before they complete their missions. Experts note that suicide bombings have already occurred in the United States with the crashing of planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. This edition of The Lipman Report examines what can be done to keep suicide bombings from becoming part of “just another day” in America.

History of suicide and terror

The use of suicide and terror as tactics of warfare is not new. In the early 20th century, Russian anarchists engaged in bombing campaigns against the Czarist regime, often losing life or limb due to the instability of the explosives. In World War II, Japanese kamikaze pilots crashed planes into U.S. Navy vessels. During the Vietnam War, bomb-laden Viet Cong commandos were sent on suicide missions to destroy U.S. and South Vietnamese equipment.

The Irish Republican Army (IRA) waged a campaign of terror that began in Northern Ireland in 1968 but quickly spread to the British mainland, claiming at least 162 deaths before a cease-fire was reached in 1997. On “Bloody Friday” – July

21, 1972 – the IRA detonated 26 bombs in Belfast, Ireland, killing 11 and injuring 130.

In April 1983, the first high-profile suicide bombing in the Middle East occurred. A 400-pound truck bomb targeted the U.S. embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, killing 63. The violence in Beirut escalated in a horrific way on October 23, 1983, when terrorists drove a water truck loaded with explosives into the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, killing 241. The explosion was equal in force to between 15,000 and 21,000 pounds of TNT.

The use of suicide bombings may have begun in the Middle East, but a group of Sri Lankan rebels elevated the practice to a new level. Although currently under a cease-fire agreement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are the most prolific suicide bombers of all. Between 1987 and 2000, the LTTE committed 168 suicide bombings, more than Hezbollah, Hamas and other terror groups combined. The LTTE first perfected the suicide vest implemented by many bombers in the Middle East.

The threat of suicide bombings has long factored into daily life in Israel, as Palestinians have used violence to campaign for an independent state. While men have traditionally fulfilled the role of suicide bomber, a speech by the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in November 2002 referred to Palestinian women as his “army of roses.” Since that time, an increasing number of females have engaged in the practice, compounding the difficulty of identifying and stopping potential bombers.

Pedestrians have carried out more than two thirds of suicide bombing attacks. A lone individual with a backpack or heavy jacket laden with plastic explosives or dynamite could carry enough to blow up a bus, train car or subway car. As the targets have shifted from specific individuals, to strategic locations to the general public, so too have the tactics changed, from solitary individuals to the use of large vehicles to compound the bomb's effects.

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Most vehicle bombs have occurred in Chechnya, Iraq and other central Asian countries. Researchers posited that the use of vehicle bombs requires a more developed infrastructure or a lack of security measures. Such bombs require a large quantity of explosives, and the vehicle has to be able to reach the target.

According to the National Counterterrorism Center, a total of 651 documented terror attacks in 2004 resulted in 1,907 deaths. One-third of the attacks took place in Iraq or Afghanistan, and 3 percent were classified as suicide bombings.

Where? Previous and prospective targets

Because security for government and military facilities has increased, civilians now constitute the majority of fatalities in suicide bombings.

IRA targets ranged from British military facilities to pubs frequented by soldiers and British sympathizers, from motor coaches to Harrods department store in London. On Oct. 12, 1984, a bomb at the Grand Hotel targeted Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who escaped uninjured.

The use of this very destructive act of terror in Israel created a constant sense of apprehension at schoolyards, restaurants, movie theaters, bus stations and other public places. Research on bombings from 1994 to 2004 has shown that the most popular target of suicide bombers were public crowded areas – shopping centers, open markets, cafes and places where people were lined up waiting to get into a venue. The open areas are more accessible, because many contained areas, especially in Israel, have security guards at the entrance, a deterrent to the bomber. In many cases, suicide bombers would not wait until entering a building but instead blew themselves up while waiting with people in line, causing considerable death and destruction.

“The terrorists we’re dealing with these days, in most cases, are simply directed at killing people—

not necessarily soldiers, not members of the armed forces, not even any specific individuals—just killing people, sowing terror amongst the population,” explains Moshe Arens, former Defense Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister of the State of Israel. “Any place where a lot of people assemble, whether a place of entertainment or a place where people go shopping, is a potential target.”

Other popular targets include public transportation, especially buses where people are crowded together in a confined area and there is no security check to board, and occupying military forces, as has been seen against the Russian military in Chechnya and the U.S. forces in Iraq.

Many people view the idea of suicide bombings as a distant threat to the United States, yet instances targeting U.S. interests have already occurred both at home and abroad. The U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks bombings in 1983, bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, and the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, were all suicide bombings, although trucks, boats and planes were used. Since the U.S. occupation of Iraq began in March 2003, multiple suicide bombings have been committed by insurgents who are protesting U.S. presence and are intent on derailing efforts to rebuild Iraq’s government as a democracy.

Experts believe that terrorists took a lesson from the September 11, 2001, attacks – which not only took almost 3,000 lives, but also had an enormous impact on the economy of the United States and the world. The next target may likely be a financial institution. New York’s Wall Street is a world icon of capitalism, the loss of which could be devastating. Similar potential targets include world financial centers in New York, San Francisco or other major cities.

The energy sector also provides appealing targets for terrorists’ mayhem. Attacks on petrochemical facilities, refineries, ports and pipelines could

produce significant economic problems. The destruction of a major fuel pipeline could dramatically impede the delivery of fuel to U.S. cities.

In addition to death and destruction, disruption is a goal of terrorists. The magnitude of the September 11, 2001, attacks attracted worldwide attention. Striking high-profile targets can produce widespread shock and fear. However, companies with a low profile or in smaller U.S. cities cannot become complacent. If surveillance of a prospective target reveals existing security measures that could thwart the plan, the terrorists will seek other, more vulnerable targets.

“We know this sort of thing could possibly be done, with terrible consequences,” says Arens. “If somebody is in the United States, and they’re preparing to take this kind of action and have people who are helping them prepare for it, then the danger is already there.”

Why? The psychology of suicide bombers

Research on an estimated 500 suicide attacks around the world since 1980 has dispelled some myths surrounding such acts, in particular the thought that suicide bombers are poor and uneducated. A study of Palestinian and Hamas suicide terrorists from the late 1980s to 2003 found that only 13 percent were from a poor background, compared to 32 percent of Palestinians in general.

The person who carries out the attack is not usually suicidal. Intensive religious and psychological training convinces them that what they do is not suicide, but is instead martyrdom, which terrorists say is permitted by the Koran – although many Islamic experts strongly disagree. The terrorists believe that the sacrifice of giving up their lives will be rewarded when they reach paradise.

The process of selecting and indoctrinating those to complete these terrorist missions is sophisticated and involves a large support network. Organizers of suicide bomber groups “train” them in small groups that are kept isolated and are drilled daily

in the doctrine of the cause. The recruits begin to identify with the group and regard it “family.”

Protection against potential threats

Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has initiated security measures to reduce the likelihood of individuals with terror plots crossing the nation’s borders to implement those plans. While closely monitoring the entry of people into the country serves as a key component in helping to prevent future terrorist attacks, the fact remains that someone could slip through unnoticed or someone already in the United States could be waiting for the appropriate time to take action.

Intelligence gathering by federal and state authorities also factors into the deterrence of suicide bombings. The infrastructure required to outfit, train and support suicide bombers includes many players, including the bomb maker, the person who creates the device to hide the bomb, those who determine the target and those who convince the person to detonate the bomb. Effective intelligence can help track those who are preparing the bomber and intercede before the attack is carried out.

Increased preparedness of U.S. law enforcement agencies has contributed to the nation’s lack of further suicide bombings since the September 11th attacks. At the same time, the appeal of the freedom and opportunity available within the United States may also play a role in swaying the minds of individuals considering suicide attacks.

“We have to fear individuals sent here on a mission, focused solely on that mission, such as the 9/11 hijackers,” says Weldon L. Kennedy, Vice Chairman of Guardsmark and retired Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. “But if people stay in the United States over time, they often decide that they would prefer to live in the country and enjoy the freedoms we offer.”

Suicide bombings in Israel have been significantly reduced through heightened vigilance and the increased presence of security personnel. The

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massive investment of time and money has resulted in notable success, as security forces have become incorporated into the routine of prominent installations, schools, restaurants, any locations where the public assembles.

“It is not foolproof, but there’s a safe chance that if you have good people who have been properly trained for the job, they will be able to identify suspicious characters and not allow them to enter these places,” says Moshe Arens.

The private sector cannot rely solely on federal and state law enforcement to prevent suicide bombings. Those individuals responsible for business continuation must identify their vulnerabilities and take precautions to ensure the safety and security of people and property.

Implement a comprehensive security program with carefully screened, well-trained security personnel. Having a visible security presence can often turn away an individual bent on destruction.

The objective of security officers is to be vigilant and alert to help prevent people with that kind of intent from entering. Properly trained security professionals have a good chance of identifying suspicious individuals and questioning them.

Conduct pre-employment background screening and ensure that vendors do the same.

Thorough applications, employer and neighborhood references, and education and military verification represent a few critical components of an extensive background investigation. In addition to selecting trustworthy employees, ensure that vendors do the same, particularly with regard to security personnel and others with access to sensitive information or areas within the facility.

An added layer of protection may be obtained through the use of interviewers who are familiar with the backgrounds of candidates and who are trained to recognize things that suggest a person with an otherwise clean background may have

ulterior motives. At the same time, employers must be very careful to avoid profiling.

Monitor access control and physical security. Ensuring that unauthorized individuals do not enter a facility or a restricted area is essential to preventing terrorism and theft. Identification badges and closed-circuit television systems can assist in these efforts. Sensitive areas, including heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems, food storage areas and water systems, require careful attention. Perimeter security should also be monitored, with periodic patrols of the grounds.

An assessment of security shortcomings recently delayed rebuilding plans for the World Trade Center site, demonstrating a heightened awareness of security concerns in New York. Other facilities have established concrete or hydraulic barriers to reduce the risk of truck bombs or other security breaches. Such security preparedness can reduce a company’s risk of becoming a terrorist target.

Many experts believe that a suicide bombing will happen in the United States. The terrorists have proven that they are motivated and capable of performing such acts. The nation cannot afford to remain complacent and wait for another tragedy to be perpetrated by terrorists before taking action. Awareness and preparation are the keys to prevention.

Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, as well as the private sector, must engage in cooperative efforts to enhance homeland security and reduce the risk of suicide bombings. Without addressing the foreseeable risk of terrorist attacks, businesses put their employees—and possibly their very existence—at risk.



The Lipman Report Editors