

September 15, 2006

A False Sense of Security

Absence of recent attacks in the U.S. has led to dangerous complacency

Since September 11, 2001, terrorism has increased significantly around the globe, but the United States has been spared. The reason for this is a matter of intense debate, but a sense of complacency has surfaced in view of anti-terror successes. Everyday literary pundits are questioning the threat posed by terrorists and the necessity of dedicating adequate resources to thwart this twenty-first century phenomenon. Eurasia, rather than America, has been the main source of terrorists as well as the main victim of terrorist acts. However in July of 2003, almost two years after 9/11, Raed al-Banna, a 32-year-old Jordanian, was turned away by wary border officials at Chicago's O'Hare airport. The officials found "multiple terrorist risk factors" associated with al-Banna and he was refused entry into the U.S. The story does not end upon his denied entry into the United States. After a suicide car bombing killed 132 people in Hilla, Iraq, in February of 2005, the bomber's severed hand, still chained to the steering wheel, was found in the wreckage. Fingerprints identified the bomber as al-Banna.

There is a general consensus among counter-terrorism officials and independent experts that the government's actions over the past five years have made the United States an increasingly challenging target. These actions range from the dismantling of camps run by al-Qaeda and the decimation of its leadership to the tightening of visa and border controls and the scores of terrorism-related prosecutions. Because of the fortunate absence of attacks in the U.S. and a fading memory of the country's vulnerability, many are questioning the necessity of maintaining this heightened sense of alertness and are also expressing concern about the enormous resources dedicated to the prevention of another attack. A general attitude of complacency has developed along with the false sense of security felt by much of the population. As illustrated by the al-Banna story, it is a constant state of vigilance that has kept the United States free from terrorism within its borders for the past five years. Any strategy to protect the U.S. from future attacks cannot encompass any degree of complacency.

Although the United States has been relatively unscathed since 9/11 and many of those arrested were amateurs, the daily atrocities around the world should compel us to give continued attention to this issue, to seriously assess the threat and to dedicate appropriate resources to neutralize this somewhat recent phenomenon in order to keep America safe. There are few counterterrorism success stories more compelling than that of Raed al-Banna. The suicide bombing easily could have occurred in the United States if not for the watchful border officials. CIA Director General Michael Hayden recently reported that more than 5000 terrorists have been captured or killed in the 5 years since the 9/11 attacks. During a 9/11 memorial event, President George W. Bush remarked that "the campaign against global terrorism is the decisive ideological struggle of the twenty-first century and the calling of our generation." Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's number two leader, warned in a recent video that United States allies, Israel and the Gulf Arab states would be the next targets in a campaign that would catalyze the West's economic demise. Clearly the war on terror is as relevant today as it was in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

The Threat

In the recent absence of instances of terror in the United States, Americans ask why poisoning the food supply, cutting electrical lines, derailing trains, using chemical weapons in the subways, blowing up oil pipelines or exploiting the countless other vulnerabilities have not occurred. Americans commonly think of attacks coming from al-Qaeda leaders, but in reality terrorists could strike at any time, in the likeness of homicidal zealots like Mohammed Atta, Timothy McVeigh or even Raed al-Banna, all of whom created or executed devastating plots.

Al-Qaeda initiated war against the West in the 1990s with the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, followed by the bombings of the embassies in Africa, the bombing of the U.S.S.

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Cole and finally the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York. Since then there have been bombings in Istanbul, Casablanca, Bali, Madrid, Amman and London. Al-Qaeda has attacked with car bombs, truck bombs, boat bombs and commercial aircraft. In view of the massive counter-terrorism efforts, al-Qaeda is now considered a horizontal group of disconnected cells like the Pakistani elements in the United Kingdom, and is now commonly seen as a nihilist group with no negotiable objectives and an ideology that embraces and glorifies suicide bombings. Many describe the current al-Qaeda as a methodology. Now al-Qaeda is crippled and is certainly not the organization it once was. Al-Qaeda, however, has placed extra emphasis on inspiring other groups to mobilize and act. When and where possible, al-Qaeda seeks to establish links to these affiliated networks to enlist their efforts to help drive their agenda.

The primary reason the United States has not been attacked again, to date, is because the United States has actively made itself less vulnerable. Islamic radicals have waged a war on everyone who does not conform to their beliefs and way of life. It is the first global war we have experienced since globalization became a factor in international affairs and the terrorist battlefield has included Madrid, London, Bali, Moscow, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan Saudi Arabia, and India. Terrorists, especially those affiliated or inspired by al-Qaeda, are committed to carrying out spectacular attacks that maximize death, injury, economic damage and political symbolism.

The recent plans by Islamic fanatics in the United Kingdom to blow up ten large aircraft flying to the United States is an example of terrorist ambitions. This plot clearly illustrates the growing sophistication of the enemy. The careful planning and the advanced technical sophistication of these would-be terrorists exemplify an ominous trend that will challenge us on all levels. However the complexity of these plots is a serious threat to a

terrorist group's ability to maintain secrecy: the more spectacular the scale of the plot, the longer it takes to plan, the costlier it is to finance, the greater the number of operatives needed to carry it out, all of which increase the chances that information about the plot will be compromised and cause the terrorists to fail. The London plot did expose a vulnerability of air transportation, highlighting how liquid explosives can be smuggled past airport detectors, a fact known by the authorities for several years. If after spending twenty billion dollars to secure the nation's airways we are still vulnerable in the skies, one must be concerned about our vastly underfunded and largely neglected security systems at seaports, land borders, mass transit systems, chemical plants, oil refineries and soft targets like shopping malls and sports arenas. To date there has been considerably less investment in security at these points of vulnerability.

The far-reaching effects of al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda's inspirational guidance has given rise to the phenomenon of the self-radicalized individual. Experts predict that, in the future, the more likely terrorist in this country will be the young adult who self-radicalizes, perhaps by reading propaganda and communicating with distant sympathizers on the Internet. Such an individual may decide to make a suicide bomb, having learned how to assemble one on the Internet, and then proceed to blow up his or her school or another target of his dissatisfaction. It is actually possible, and has probably already happened, for an individual to go to jihadist web sites and become radicalized, excited about becoming a suicide bomber. This is an example of a possible transition from being a jihadist and desiring to create a caliphate to being a nihilist. This situation is similar to the case of the Columbine killers, but acts by these individuals are still terrorism and very disruptive on many levels. A recent example of the effects of

self-radicalized individuals would be the two young Germans terrorists, of Middle Eastern ethnicity, who left substantial bombs that fortunately failed to explode on trains in Germany. This act was purportedly motivated by the recent war in the Middle East. The construction of these types of bombs do not take a great deal of competence or experience. However the self-radicalized conspirators in Madrid and London had established links with more organized and capable radical circles in places like Pakistan, posing a threat that is potentially much larger than that of the two young Germans.

Analysts have consistently pointed out that the Muslim diaspora in the United States is upwardly mobile and well represented in the major professions, allowing for social integration with other religious and ethnic groups present in the U.S., which minimizes anti-U.S. sentiments and therefore prevents the development of serious “home-grown” terrorists. This is a stark contrast to the United Kingdom, where the London airplane plot was hatched by disgruntled Islamists who likely viewed themselves as marginalized citizens. But there are now more Muslim immigrants to the United States than anytime in the country’s history. This increase alone poses no threat to U.S. security, but there is growing statistical and anecdotal evidence that suggests some Muslims in the United States have been increasingly dissatisfied in significant ways, especially since 9/11, due in part to American foreign policy and in part because of the way in which the Patriot Act and other counterterrorism measures were instituted and implemented in the United States.

Weapons and targets

Although suicide car bombs and backpacks seem to be the preferred weapons of today’s terrorists, due to their effectiveness in publicity yet relative simplicity in execution, one cannot dismiss the possibility of the use of more destructive weapons. Some experts explain the absence of another attack in the United States since 9/11 as a result of al-Qaeda’s determination to prepare a bigger attack than the last one, with a greater effect on the economy. This reasoning leads us to the potential use of weapons of mass destruction.

Recently, in the interest of investigating this possibility, journalists with the ABC network successfully completed the purchase of 3000 pounds of ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer that can be used as bomb material, to expose the fact that despite the use of ammonium nitrate in the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, there is no federal law requiring registration, licensing or valid identification in order to purchase the same materials that ultimately led to the destruction of the federal building, materials that can easily be purchased and used again by terrorists. On a larger scale, some experts maintain and possible detonation of a nuclear weapon in the United States is a very real possibility. There is no controversy about the existence of highly enriched uranium and plutonium in at least 55 countries around the world, and many of these countries are not on the list of U.S. allies. The actions and methods required to assemble a nuclear device, using a very small amount of imported enriched material, are no secret and the concept is well understood by government officials of “rogue nations,” many of whom already have access to uranium and plutonium. Many scenarios have been analyzed by the Department of Homeland Security showing exactly how small amounts of nuclear material can be brought into the country and how bombs can be assembled from this material.

The threat to nuclear reactors and chemical plants are another example of a worst-case scenario. To a terrorist, a nuclear reactor is a nuclear bomb waiting to be detonated. Imagine a repeat of the tragedy of Chernobyl. The bombing of a nuclear reactor or a chemical plant could disperse not only lethal but mutagenic chemicals. Obviously there are numerous plausible threats and there could be an attack from angles not yet anticipated. The threat is very real, the possibilities diverse, and an attack could come from anywhere. We are somewhat prepared, but perhaps not fully.

Our enemy is extraordinarily adaptable and smart, and we should never underestimate them. When shoe bombs failed, they moved to liquid bombs. Although some experts worry about nuclear

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weapons others believe the terrorists would have difficulty acquiring them in useable form, but there is a consensus that biological and radiological attacks are a lot easier to contemplate and these weapons should be a higher priority. Even among the experts there is disagreement, but they all agree that the higher we build the walls of the castle, they will continue to build a stronger catapult.

Five years after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, businesses in big cities across America have radically changed the way they approach security. Perhaps the most visible change has come in areas like building lobbies, where security has been beefed up at access points with metal detectors, bomb detection machines and extra duty personnel. The private sector spent approximately 46 billion to 76.5 billion on homeland security during fiscal year 2003 with up to 14.3 billion allocated to securing areas like building entrances.

In addition to terrorism, workplace violence, thefts, pandemics, industrial espionage, and hurricanes all disrupt business continuity. However a recent study reveals that 39% of U.S. companies still lack a basic crisis plan and 65% have not conducted crisis drills or simulations in the last year.

The Time for Urgency is Now®

As the years since 9/11 pass with few incidents, a general sense of complacency has developed. Over the last five years there has been only a three percent increase in overall spending on security across the Fortune 500 companies. The issue of liability is one obstacle reinforcing a reluctance to make changes. Acknowledging a vulnerability and taking reasonable measures to deal with an identified problem may not be enough to protect against liability, and companies must be proactive and anticipate vulnerabilities. There is a need for companies to have a mitigation strategy, a strategy to anticipate and guard against future disasters, minimizing exposure to litigation

through reasonable and proactive efforts to identify and eliminate any vulnerabilities.

Although 85% of the national infrastructure is in the hands of the private sector, the Government has a "hands off" policy until a disaster occurs. The Government needs to take a proactive stance and have a cohesive program, so that the private sector can invest large sums of money in security without fears of new legislation that will change the rules. Consequently there is a definite need for a real public-private partnership and a sharing of accountability. Unfortunately there is a lack of motivation in the private sector because decisions are made with limited resources based on monthly profit and loss.

Companies have a civic duty to be prepared because in the event of a major catastrophe fire, police, emergency management and public health systems will be overwhelmed. A business should not add to this chaos because they are ill-prepared. It is essential to assign preparedness duties and to have a plan to assist employees. There is a logic behind lagging security standards from an efficiency perspective because a company that makes a significant investment in security does not want to be the only one increasing security while the competitors are undercutting expenses. Sporadic and isolated acts of preparedness are not enough. Some national preparedness goals are necessary to respond successfully to all imaginable security scenarios, from terrorist acts to a pandemic flu.



The Lipman Report Editors