

Coordinated Terrorist Attacks

Implications for Local Responders

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With elections only a few days away, the terrorism threat level is at high, and law enforcement personnel are on the lookout for suspicious behavior that may indicate an imminent terrorist attack. As the morning commute gets underway, three bombs explode on a commuter train at a downtown station, killing and injuring those in the path of the blast wave and shrapnel. Law enforcement officers and emergency medical

personnel respond, but, as they mobilize, four more bombs explode in another train arriving at the same station, instantly doubling the number of people dead and wounded. Soon, another bomb goes off inside a train a few miles away, requiring public safety personnel and resources there as well. The nightmare reaches its peak 5 minutes later as two more bombs blow apart a commuter train at still another downtown location, killing and injuring

even more people. The emergency response community now faces mass fatalities and seemingly countless injuries at three separate sites. Though this scenario sounds like the subject of novels and Hollywood thrillers, it actually took place on March 11, 2004, in Madrid, Spain.¹ This type of incident, like many similar ones in recent years, has important implications for the ways in which local responders prepare for terrorist attacks of all kinds.

DEFINITIONS AND TRENDS

Coordinated terrorist assaults include elements that occur simultaneously or nearly so and are conducted by a single terrorist organization or jointly by sympathetic groups. Historically, however, the vast majority of hazardous device-based terrorist attacks have not fit this description, but have been “simple” in design, featuring only one component, such as a single, placed bomb or a suicide bomber. Nevertheless, in recent years, the number of coordinated assaults has increased, especially among the terrorist groups of greatest concern to the United States. Moreover, since 1983, half of the 14 terrorist incidents with 100 or more fatalities were coordinated ones.²

A mix of interrelated reasons makes coordinated attacks appealing to terrorist groups. Such incidents have the potential to cause greater damage than simple operations in terms of the lives, property, and geographic areas affected, as well as the psychological impact. The increased destruction lends credibility to the terrorist organization as it reflects an ability to plan and execute sophisticated operations, implies a multiplicity of personnel and supporters, and creates the impression that the group can cover many areas at

the same time. This combination of perceived and actual destructive power and resultant credibility makes such attacks and the organizations that perpetrate them more “newsworthy,” allowing such groups to gain public attention, one of the main goals of all terrorist campaigns.

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Overall, coordinated terrorist incidents fall into three main categories: 1) parallel device attacks, where participants use more than one device simultaneously or almost simultaneously in the same location; 2) secondary attacks, where the initial assault is followed by one or more additional attacks in the same location, typically targeting responders; and 3) multiple dispersed attacks, where groups stage simultaneous or near-simultaneous ones at different locations. Depending on the type, more than one incident

scene might exist, but, taken together, they constitute a single attack, with repercussions greater than those of the individual-component category. With this in mind, understanding how terrorists use coordinated assaults can assist local emergency responders in better planning, training, and organizing to respond to such incidents.

Parallel Devices

Parallel devices allow terrorists to inflict greater damage in any one incident site without having to construct or transport a single, larger one required to create similar results. In other words, rather than relying on one large bomb, terrorists can use two or more smaller, yet equally lethal, ones. The reasonable assumption that smaller devices are less vulnerable to detection raises the likelihood of the attack’s execution. Moreover, regardless of the size of the bomb, even if one or more of the perpetrators is intercepted, others still may manage to complete their missions. Thus, parallel devices provide terrorists with greater assurance that they will execute at least part of their planned attack.

The use of parallel devices also allows terrorists to create multiple focus points at the incident site, thereby expanding the overall perimeter affected by the attack. With this expansion

comes greater demand for both responders and resources, which can tax emergency reaction elsewhere in the jurisdiction. At the same time, this high concentration of forces in a single location potentially increases their susceptibility to secondary attacks.

The triple-suicide bombing carried out by Hamas on September 4, 1997, on the Ben-Yehuda pedestrian mall in Jerusalem can demonstrate a parallel device attack.³ In that one, three males, one dressed as a woman, each detonated a 4- to 5-pound bomb packed with nuts and bolts to create puncture, as well as blast, injuries. Five people were killed and 181 were wounded.

Attackers also employed parallel devices in the October 12, 2002, attack in Bali, which killed 202.⁴ The first blast, from a relatively small bomb, drew people out onto the street and was followed 10 to 15 seconds later by a much larger explosion, which caused most of the destruction. The near-simultaneous attacks increased the lethality of the bombings, which targeted mainly Western tourists.

Secondary Attacks

Secondary attacks have two or more stages of attack. The first one draws in emergency responders, regardless of the extent of deaths and injuries.

In the second, the responders themselves become the target and include not only law enforcement, fire and rescue, and emergency medical personnel but civilian Good Samaritans as well.

Targeting responders serves two main purposes. First, it threatens to delay or deny treatment to victims from the first stage of the attack, increasing the likelihood of death and the severity of injuries. Second, killing, injuring, or otherwise hindering responders exacerbates the public's feelings of fear and helplessness by demonstrating the vulnerability of society's guardians. To the extent that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder result from both the trauma and the perceived powerlessness to influence events and outcomes,

this type of attack might make such reactions more likely among responders and the public alike.

The Provisional IRA often used secondary devices.⁵ Similarly, two bombings in 1997—one at a clinic in suburban Atlanta that provided abortions and one at an Atlanta gay nightclub—also involved the use of secondary devices.⁶

Multiple Dispersed Attacks

Dispersed attacks, like the other two types of coordinated assaults, seek to expand the extent and spread of damage and fear. When carried out within the same jurisdiction, they also threaten to exhaust response resources more quickly, which, as in the case of secondary attacks, could lead to delays in treatment or an

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increase in fear due to the perception of responders being overwhelmed.

The scope of the spread in dispersed attacks determines their impact on local responding agencies. Thus, for example, the crash of hijacked United Flight 93 near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, on September 11, 2001, taxed the responders in that and neighboring communities, but did not pull *local* responders from New York City, where they were needed to respond to the attacks on the World Trade Center.⁷ If planes were forced down in two locations on opposite sides of the same city, however, that city would have to divide its resources or rely more heavily on mutual aid.

Attacks carried out across jurisdictions or operational areas (or even across countries) create more political-strategic than local-tactical dispersion effects. The multiplicity of al-Qaeda's assaults on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 (across countries) and of the ones of September 2001 (across states), for example, demonstrated to the world that al-Qaeda could plan and execute highly lethal, near-simultaneous operations, hundreds of miles apart, against the world's most powerful country. In both of these cases, the group had multiple tactical targets but only one strategic target—the United States.

Al-Qaeda's capability undoubtedly earned the group political capital both in terms of being taken seriously by the international community and for recruitment purposes around the world.

Al-Qaeda and the groups it has inspired continue to rely on dispersed attacks, as evidenced in the May 2003 incidents in Morocco and Saudi Arabia.⁸ These were at once dispersed across and within countries.

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The incidents in these two countries were dispersed in each—five simultaneous assaults in Casablanca and three simultaneous ones in Riyadh.

Other terrorist groups have carried out multiple dispersed attacks. The Hizbullah bombings of the U.S. Marine barracks and French military headquarters on October 23, 1983, killed 241 and 58, respectively.⁹ Almost a decade later, in the spring of 1993, the Provisional

IRA executed a number of dispersed assaults, including the firebombing of two department stores, the hijacking and bombing of a pair of taxis in London, and the placing of bombs in trash cans a block apart to target those fleeing the first blast.¹⁰ The March 20, 1995, Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, which killed 12 and injured more than 1,000, also comprised multiple dispersed incidents.¹¹ The attackers released gas via crude dispersal mechanisms simultaneously on five different subway cars on three separate lines.

Hoaxes also can cause fear and panic in a population, and terrorists have used simultaneous multiple dispersed hoaxes to create trouble for emergency responders. In January 2004, terrorists contacted law enforcement personnel in Belfast, Northern Ireland, indicating that they had placed multiple car bombs around the city.¹² The subsequent response to the calls strained the responder community and locked down traffic throughout the city. Given the credible threat, local law enforcement agencies had no choice but to respond.

SIMILARITIES

Probably due to ease of planning and manufacture, the individual-component portions within coordinated incidents have tended to be of the same

type, such as simultaneous or subsequent pipe bombs, car bombs, or suicide bombers. Little reason exists to believe that this trend will continue, especially in light of some recent examples of mixed-type attacks.

On December 1, 2001, just yards from where the triple-suicide bombing took place in Jerusalem more than 4 years earlier, Hamas carried out a double-suicide bombing, followed approximately 20 minutes later by a car bomb.¹³ Eleven people were killed and approximately 180 were wounded in the combined explosions. This one proves noteworthy not only because it provides an example of different means being used in the same assault but also because it demonstrates that the types of coordinated attacks can be combined. The two suicide bombers made this a parallel device attack, while the car bomb turned it into a secondary one as well. Clearly, the categories described are not mutually exclusive.

Another mixed-type and mixed-category attack is the simultaneous al-Qaeda suicide and car bombings of an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya (parallel devices), which occurred at the same time as the attempted shooting down of an Israeli 757 jetliner in the same city (dispersed attacks) on November 28, 2002.¹⁴ While

the aircraft emerged undamaged, 13 people were killed and approximately 80 were injured in the hotel bombings.

IMPLICATIONS

Coordinated attacks are not a new phenomenon. However, their increasing frequency makes it worth reviewing some of the implications for local responding agencies.

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Decentralize Equipment and Personnel

The potential for coordinated attacks means that local responders must have the capability to respond to multiple incidents at multiple locations. Positioning equipment and personnel in a central site might make organizational sense, but could turn into a liability in the event that attacks occur at opposite extremes of the operational area or if the equipment or personnel themselves become targets.

Resist Deploying All Resources

Agencies may find it tempting, especially in the face of a first terrorist attack, to “hyper-respond,” sending everyone and everything to the incident site. But, they should resist this temptation for two reasons. First, secondary attacks could target responders and equipment. It is prudent to hold some back (though obviously not to the detriment of necessary patient care or public safety) in anticipation of such an occurrence. Second, dispersed attacks or other types of routine emergencies will demand responders elsewhere. As is the case with any mass-casualty event, rapid availability of mutual aid remains critical.

Plan, Exercise, and Train

Local responders know well the importance of prior planning and frequent and realistic training and exercises for making complex technical procedures a matter of habit. In this regard, responding to coordinated assaults is no different from reacting to any other type of emergency. Responders’ actions reflect the extent to which they have prepared and trained for such occurrences. Moreover, as response to hazardous device assaults involves fire and rescue, emergency medical, law enforcement, and other agencies, all must train

together for coordinated attack scenarios.

With this in mind, local agencies should add coordinated attack response “playbooks” to their emergency operations plans. Alternatively, they could include coordinated attack scenarios in other existing playbooks for similar situations. Agencies should rigorously practice the new procedures so responders at all levels become thoroughly familiar with them.

Coordinated attack response planning and training should address command-level issues as well. Emergency response agencies should consider such questions as whether to designate single or multiple incident commanders at the dispersed locations and how best to allocate and coordinate limited resources among multiple attack sites.

Protect the Force

It is difficult to know in advance whether secondary attacks will occur. An attack followed by a secondary one appears the same as a single assault *until* responders recognize that they have become the target. Therefore, responders must assume that terrorists will attempt one. This puts a premium on force protection, a role that falls primarily to law enforcement officials who can take a number of simple but

crucial steps at the scene to help deter or prevent secondary attacks. These include establishing a secure perimeter far enough from the locus of the first assault to allow responders to do their jobs safely; sweeping for secondary devices; and monitoring, photographing, and interviewing bystanders, among whom might be eyewitnesses and terrorist spotters. Of importance, force protection, while essentially a law enforcement

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function, cannot be properly executed without the cooperation of and coordination with fire and rescue, emergency medical, and other responding agencies.

CONCLUSION

Along with the recent increase in coordinated attacks has come a corresponding rise in fatalities and injuries. Terrorists feel the need to create ever greater impact on their targeted societies, and coordinated

assaults bring both added lethality and “newsworthiness.” Al Qaeda is not the only terrorist group attacking in this manner. Terrorists around the world are learning from each other’s successes and adopting and refining this tactic. For emergency responders, coordinated attacks bring not only greater danger to the public they serve but also the potential that responders themselves may be targeted. To mitigate the effects of such incidents, law enforcement agencies and other local responders must incorporate coordinated attack scenarios into their planning, training, and deployment. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Lawrence Wright, “The Terror Web,” *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2004; retrieved on August 5, 2004, from <http://www.newyorker.com>.

² Pre-2001 data from Chris Quillen, “Mass Casualty Bombings Chronology,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 25 (2002): 293-302.

³ Serge Schmemmann, “Bombings in Jerusalem: The Overview,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1997, sec. A1; and MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base; retrieved on August 4, 2004, from <http://www.tkb.org/Incident.jsp?incID=2340>.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002* (Washington, DC, April 2003), 18; retrieved on February 1, 2004, from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/20177.pdf>.

⁵ George Buck, *Preparing for Terrorism: An Emergency Services Guide* (Albany, NY: Delmar, 2002), 18; and Owen Bowcott, “Soldier Dies as IRA Bombers Ambush Patrol,” *The Guardian*, February 10, 1993, 2.

⁶ John Harmon, "Terrorism: It's Getting Less Disciplined, More Dangerous," Cox News Service, March 31, 1999.

⁷ This does not include federal resources, which could be a different matter.

⁸ "Bombs Kill at Least 20 in Downtown Casablanca," CNN.com, May 19, 2003; retrieved on August 4, 2004, from <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/05/16/morocco.blasts/>; and "U.S., Saudis Suspect al Qaeda in Riyadh Blasts," CNN.com, May 13, 2002; retrieved on August 5, 2004, from <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/05/12/saudi.blast/>.

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¹¹ Many sources list over 5,000 injured in this attack. However, around 4,000 of those were diagnosed as "worried well."

¹² Claire Regan, "UDA Blamed for Hoax Alerts," *Belfast Telegraph*, January 16, 2004.

¹³ Lee Hockstader, "Two Suicide Bombers Kill at Least 10 in Jerusalem: Attacks, Nearby Car Blast Wound 170 in Heart of City," *Washington Post*, December 2, 2001, sec. A1.

¹⁴ Emily Wax, "Suicide Bombers Kill 12 at Resort in Kenya: Hotel Hosted Israelis, Missiles Fired Nearby at Plane," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2002, sec. A1.

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The statements in this article reflect the personal opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

The Bulletin Honors

The California Highway Patrol Academy in Sacramento presents its World Trade Center 9/11 Memorial Fountain, which honors the men and women who died in those attacks. Dedicated on August 11, 2004, the fountain features two rectangular black marble pillars, representing the twin towers, resting on a square concrete pedestal. A donated piece of a steel I beam from the World Trade Center rests between the two marble buildings. Behind the towers sits a



large upright rectangular structure inscribed with the initials "WTC"; water flows over it, coming to rest in a pool at the foot of the pedestal.