

Background

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Lessons from Mumbai: Assessing Armed Assault Threats to the United States

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For three bloody days in November 2008, Indian police and military forces battled heavily armed and well-organized groups of terrorists who fanned out across the city of Mumbai. Armed terrorist assaults against populated areas will be neither an unprecedented nor a remote threat in the future, and Mumbai offers lessons for the United States in how to respond to such threats.

Effective counterterrorism, intelligence, and information-sharing programs are the best way to prevent organized conspiracies from undertaking armed assaults, using vehicle-borne explosives, or employing other common terrorist tactics. The best way to minimize the likelihood that such attacks will be successful is to develop an integrated approach: a homeland security enterprise that promotes joint action linking law enforcement, emergency responders, and federal capabilities (such as the U.S. military) in a common effort to save lives and property.

Unthinkable But Possible

While November's armed assaults in Mumbai were horrific, they are not unprecedented. Russia, for instance, has experienced a string of similar incidents undertaken by Chechen separatists.

- In 1995, 1,000 hospital patients were held captive at Budyonovsk, near the border with Chechnya. Russian troops stormed the hospital twice, and more than 100 civilians died during the effort to retake the hospital grounds.

Talking Points

- Armed terrorist assaults against populated areas such as the recent attacks in Mumbai are neither an unprecedented nor a remote threat. They offer critical lessons for the United States in preventing and responding to such attacks.
- The number of publicly known arrests related to organized terrorist attacks demonstrates that terrorist groups have not relinquished their essential goals of assault on the U.S.
- The best defense against organized armed assaults is to stop them before they occur by developing and maintaining effective counterterrorism, intelligence, and information-sharing programs.
- If attacks are successful, prior preparation is essential in dealing with the aftermath. This preparation must include an effective and integrated national homeland security system that brings together law enforcement, emergency responders, and federal assets.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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- In October 2002, 50 heavily armed Chechen rebels seized a Moscow theater, holding hundreds hostage. They booby-trapped entrances with mines, strapped explosives to some of the hostages, and rigged a large bomb in the center of the theater. Russian Special Forces pumped the theater full of gas, and more than 100 hostages died from the effects of that gas.
- On September 1, 2004, a well-armed group of Chechen rebels stormed a school at Beslan in the North Caucasus. Armed with automatic weapons and explosives, they took more than 1,000 hostages. After a bloody stand-off, 334 hostages were killed.

Even the United States has not been immune to the danger of planned armed assaults. In August 2005, a Pakistani national was arrested in a terrorism investigation of a possible plot to attack the Israeli consulate, California National Guard facilities, and other targets in Southern California. In 2007, the FBI arrested six men from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, for planning an armed assault on Fort Dix.

Threat and Response

Armed assault is a category of threat that includes a range of weapons and tactics traditionally associated with terrorist activities, from car bombs to kidnapping, sabotage, and assassination, to weapons rarely employed in the United States such as surface-to-air man-portable missiles, rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers, and suicide bombers.

Traditionally, bombs—particularly surface-delivered bombs—have been the weapon most often employed in terrorist attacks. Bombs can deliver significant destruction at modest cost, require little technical skill, can be assembled with commercially available materials, and leave a minimal operational signature that might compromise security and surprise. Indeed, numerous illicit Web sites include instructions on everything from assembling improvised explosives to large-truck bombs.¹

The United States has been far from immune to the threat of bombing since long before 9/11. Bombs have long been a favored tactic for criminals and domestic terrorists. The Department of the Treasury recorded 2,757 bombing incidents in the U.S., resulting in over \$50 million in damage, in 1996 alone.²

With each major bombing attempt, new security measures are adopted, making public infrastructure, high-profile objectives, and government facilities less accessible targets. Nonetheless, many assets remain vulnerable to terrorist strikes. Even as additional defensive measures are employed, rather than discarding a highly desirable and proven form of attack, enemies may adjust their courses of action by refining previously used tactics; seeking new creative means for delivering weapons, such as various forms of suicide attack (even hiding explosives internally in human bodies); attempting to generate explosions by sabotaging hazardous material; searching out critical weaknesses in security systems; or shifting to unprotected targets with high potential for economic disruption or psychological effect such as entertainment venues, cultural icons (museums, monuments, historic sites), office buildings, universities, or shopping malls.

One terrorist conspiracy attempted just such an innovation. In 2007, authorities arrested four men for plotting a significant explosion at John F. Kennedy airport in New York City by igniting the pipelines carrying jet fuel to the airport.

Terrorists might well seek alternative forms of attack to demonstrate their ability to strike America. Acts of sabotage, kidnapping, raids, and assassination may increase in frequency. They also might attempt to introduce weaponry not normally used in the United States, employing tactics and devices used frequently elsewhere including rocket-propelled grenades; shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles; suicide bombers; small, ground-launched rockets; or improvised mortars fired by timers.

1. See, for example, Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2006), p. 123.

2. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "1996 Selected Explosive Incidents," 1996, at http://www.atf.treas.gov/pub/fire-explo_pub/eir/cover.htm (December 3, 2008).

Again, some have already tried. In 2003, the U.S. government successfully intercepted an attempted arms sale of a shoulder-fired Igla SA-18 missile capable of downing commercial aircraft three miles in range and two miles in altitude.³ The novelty of such attacks in the United States would probably deliver added psychological damage out of proportion to the physical destruction inflicted.

There are some legal and international restrictions that may make it harder to obtain certain weapons suitable for armed assault. In December 2000, 33 nations signed the Wassenaar Arrangement to stem the proliferation of man-portable air-defense systems.⁴ Various statutes and federal and state regulations also affect the import of weapons and the sale of explosives.⁵ But the opportunities to sidestep these barriers, particularly for obtaining small arms and limited amounts of explosives, are numerous. In addition, weapons and explosives can be fashioned from many common materials, and individual armed assaults are not beyond the ability of almost any terrorist group.

While the United States is highly vulnerable to individual attacks, staging an integrated campaign of frequent, major strikes faces serious obstacles. The more ambitious and well-organized a campaign is, the more difficult it will be to support. The more operational activities required to prepare and mount an operation, the more vulnerability there will be to sacrificing security and surprise. U.S. law enforcement has gained much experience addressing large-scale conspiracies from years of battling organized crime. Similar tactics can work in combating transnational terrorist conspiracies.⁶

Armed terrorist assaults might be useful in any number of scenarios. They could be part of an anti-access campaign, sabotaging key facilities in the United States to prevent the deployment of U.S. forces.⁷ They might be used as a threat to deter or coerce the United States. Alerting authorities to potential attacks, however, could sacrifice the element of surprise and allow time for countermeasures to be taken. On the other hand, since it is relatively easy to create a credible armed assault threat, deception and hoaxes could be effective instruments for a cost-imposing strategy designed to force the United States to adopt excessive responses, such as expensive new security measures.

Armed assaults could also be an integral part of a protracted war strategy designed to weaken the country over time. For example, terrorist groups might launch a series of strikes, hoping for an aggressive response by law enforcement authorities that might be seen by the American population as threatening civil rights. This in turn could generate a backlash against the government and create social unrest.⁸

The challenge for any terrorist employing armed assaults in the United States is that the attacks are unlikely to prove decisive by themselves. Individual attacks are among the least likely ways to “bring America down.” A protracted campaign, on the other hand, could represent a significant danger, particularly if it capitalizes on other serious economic or social problems. Transnational terrorist organizations are shifting away from calibrated, limited acts of terrorism, designed to shape public opinion or provoke a specific response from the targeted state, to the unconstrained use of violence

3. James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and Jack Spencer, “Facts About the Shoulder-Fired Missile Threat,” Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 328, August 14, 2003, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/BallisticMissileDefense/wm328.cfm>.
4. U.S. Department of State, Statement by Richard Boucher, Spokesman, “Wassenaar Arrangement Agreement: Man-Portable Air Defense Systems Export Controls Man-Portable Air Defense Systems Export Controls,” December 5, 2000, at <http://secretary.state.gov/www/briefings/statements/2000/ps001205b.html> (December 4, 2008).
5. For a summary of regulations, see U.S. Department of the Treasury, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, Web site, at <http://www.atf.treas.gov/regulations/index.htm> (December 4, 2008).
6. See Michael A. Sheehan, *Crush the Cell: How to Defeat Terrorism Without Terrorizing Ourselves* (New York: Crown, 2008).
7. This scenario was tested in a simulation conducted at the U.S. Army War College. See Richard Brennan, *Protecting the Homeland: Insights from Army Wargames* (Santa Monica, Cal.: RAND, 2002).
8. For an example of the discussion of these issues, see transcript, “Fighting Terrorism, Preserving Civil Liberties,” Cato Institute Policy Forum, October 2, 2001, at <http://www.cato.org/events/transcripts/011002et.pdf> (December 4, 2008).

intended to inflict maximum carnage and fundamentally change society. Attacks cease to be a psychological weapon to influence behavior and become a means to another end: physical destruction. A distinctive feature of these strikes is that their purpose is justified and articulated in extremist messianic, apocalyptic, or millenarian terms.

There is little question that this trend is real. By some counts, the number of groups claiming to base their actions on religious or ideological extremism grew from two in 1980 to 11 in 1992 to 26 in 1995. In 1995, worldwide, a religiously motivated group perpetrated every terrorist act resulting in eight or more fatalities. There was also a sharp increase in attacks, beginning in 1999. Destruction and casualties from attacks by non-state enemies, even before 9/11, had risen steadily.

By most measures, the lethality inflicted per attack has increased over the past decade.⁹ According to the Human Security Project, the rate and number of transnational terrorist attacks, as well as the appeal of radical extremist agendas, have been declining in recent years, but the number of casualties per attack is on the rise.¹⁰

The trend toward higher levels of violence is most significant because the increasing lethality of

terrorist strikes has been achieved not with weapons of mass destruction, but with the instruments of armed assault. For enemies looking for an easy way to inflict fear and casualties, armed assault is among the best options.

A revival of state-sponsored terrorism could provide new sources of sanctuary and support as well. One possibility is that a state may opt to conduct covert armed assaults against the American homeland in support of a regional competition with the United States.

Iran offers a case in point. Iran routinely employs terrorism as a means to advance its regional security interests and reaffirm its commitment to the founding principles of the Iranian revolution. Its support for terrorism has waxed and waned over the course of the past three decades. There is no evidence that the country has sponsored or is contemplating attacks on the U.S. homeland, but it still views terrorism as a legitimate weapon and has sponsored acts to advance its own interests at the risk of regional stability. If Iran perceived supporting attacks against the United States as being in its interest and calculated that it could avoid attribution or otherwise protect itself from U.S. retaliation, it might well represent a serious threat to the homeland.¹¹

9. For the supporting statistical analysis, see Bruce Hoffman, "Terrorism Trends and Prospects," in *Countering the New Terrorism*, ed. Ian O. Lesser, Bruce Hoffman, John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt, and Michael Zanini (Santa Monica, Cal.: RAND, 1999), at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR989/MR989.chap2.pdf> (December 4, 2008). There is some debate about the reasons for the statistical trends of the past two decades. Worldwide, the number of terrorist incidents overall declined during the 1990s, but this may not indicate a long-term trend. Some analysts argue that increases in terrorist incidents strongly correlate with periods of war, major regional crises, and divisive international events. There are so many variables, they contend, that identifying long-term trends is virtually impossible. See Rex A. Hudson, *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why? A Report Prepared by the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress*, September 1999, at http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/Soc_Psych_of_Terrorism.pdf (December 4, 2008); Bruce Hoffman, "Old Madness, New Methods: Revival of Religious Terrorism Begs for Broader U.S. Policy," *RAND Review*, Winter 1998–99, pp. 14–15; David Tucker, "Combating International Terrorism," in *The Terrorism Threat and U.S. Government Response: Operational and Organizational Factors*, ed. James M. Smith and William C. Thomas (Colorado: U.S. Air Force Academy, USAF Institute for National Security Studies, March 2001), pp. 130–139; Richard A. Falkenrath, Robert D. Newman, and Bradley A. Thayer, *America's Achilles' Heel: Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 179–202.
10. Human Security Report Project, "Human Security Brief 2007," May 21, 2008, at <http://www.humansecuritybrief.info> (December 4, 2008).
11. Ely Karmon, "Counterterrorism Policy: Why Tehran Starts and Stops Terrorism," *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. V, No. 4 (December 1998), at <http://www.meforum.org/meq/dec98/elyk.shtml> (December 4, 2008). Karmon argues that only a confrontational approach will deter Iranian terrorist activity. For a different analysis of Iranian decision-making and the prospects for the future, see Daniel L. Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), pp. 99–104.

Preventing Battlefield America

The best way to deal with the threat of armed assaults on the United States is to prevent attacks from being planned in the first place. Since 9/11, effective counterterrorism, intelligence, and information-sharing operations have proven to be the best means to keep the nation safe from terrorist attacks of all kinds.¹²

Criticisms of post-9/11 efforts to protect the United States from attack range from claims that America is more vulnerable than ever to the contention that the transnational terrorist danger is vastly overhyped.¹³ A review of publicly available information about at least 19 terrorist conspiracies thwarted by U.S. law enforcement suggests that the truth lies somewhere between these two arguments.¹⁴

The list of publicly known arrests of alleged terrorists demonstrates conclusively that the lack of another major terrorist attack is not a sign that organizations have relinquished their essential goals. A number of plots conducted by individuals have been prevented as a result of the increase in effective counterterrorism investigations by the United States in cooperation with friendly and allied governments. Continuing these operations, which include sound, effective, and lawful intelligence, surveillance, and investigations, is one of the best weapons in America's arsenal for the long war.

Clearly, some of the most controversial measures since 9/11 have proven to be the most effective. These measures have neither undermined the health of American civil society nor undermined constitutional liberties as many critics contended

they would. In particular, Congress and the Administration should continue to:

- **Rely on the investigative authorities established in the USA Patriot Act.** In the wake of the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York on September 11, 2001, Congress passed the USA Patriot Act.¹⁵ Among other things, the act provided additional authorities for the sharing of information between law enforcement and intelligence agencies and granted additional powers to fight terrorism, primarily law enforcement tools that had already been used to fight other serious crimes. Congress stipulated that these powers would expire unless reauthorized by law. In 2006, Congress extended the investigative authorities in the Patriot Act. These powers have been used to conduct counterterrorism investigations. Congress and the Administration should not change or undermine these authorities.
- **Exploit the authority to monitor terrorist communications worldwide as provided under the FISA Amendments Act of 2008.**¹⁶ The capacity to monitor terrorist communications is essential for building an intelligence picture of the threat and focusing investigations.
- **Develop the Information Sharing Environment (ISE) under the office of the Director of National Intelligence.** Established by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, the ISE exists to create a "trusted partnership among all levels of government in the United States, the private sector, and our foreign partners, in order to detect, prevent, disrupt,

12. James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., "Securing the Homefront," *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, No. 12 (Spring 2007), at <http://www.securityaffairs.org/issues/2007/12/carafano.php>. (December 4, 2008).

13. For analysis contending that the United States remains vulnerable, see Clark Kent Ervin, *Open Target: Where America Is Vulnerable to Attack* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). For a study claiming that the transnational threat is far less severe than is commonly assumed, see John Mueller, "Is There Still a Terrorist Threat? The Myth of the Omnipresent Enemy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 5 (September/October 2006), at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060901/jacomment85501/john-mueller/is-there-still-a-terrorist-threat.html> (December 4, 2008).

14. James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., "U.S. Thwarts 19 Terrorist Attacks Against America Since 9/11," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2085, November 13, 2007, at http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg2085.cfm#_ftn1.

15. See Paul Rosenzweig, Alane Kochems, and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., "The Patriot Act Reader," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 01, September 13, 2004, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/homelandsecurity/The-Patriot-Act-Reader.cfm>.

16. For the importance of this authority, see General Michael Hayden, Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence, address to the National Press Club, January 23, 2006.

preempt, and mitigate the effects of terrorism against the territory, people, and interests of the United States by the effective and efficient sharing of terrorism and homeland security information.”¹⁷ The ISE is essential in promoting effective integration and cooperation among federal, state, and local anti-terrorism efforts.

Fighting Back

It is unrealistic to believe that all homeland security measures will thwart every attack, every time. In particular, armed assaults and vehicle-borne explosive attacks are tactics that are within reach of any modestly funded and committed terrorist group. But if the U.S. government takes the offensive, it can take the initiative away from the terrorists, lessen their chances of success, and mitigate the damage they cause. Washington should therefore:

- **Retain an integrated approach to homeland security.** When an explosion happens, the government cannot delay its response until it knows whether it is a terrorist attack or an industrial accident. The nation needs to respond with alacrity, and that means taking an integrated “all-hazards” approach from the local level to the national level. Therefore, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) must remain an integral part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Removing FEMA from DHS would re-create gaps and vulnerabilities that were eliminated when the Homeland Security Act of 2002 created DHS.¹⁸
- **Stop wasting money.** The lion’s share of financial and material support should be targeted toward state and local public-preparedness programs in those areas of the country that are at greatest risk—where terrorist attacks and catastrophic natural disasters are most likely to occur. Legislated mandatory distribution of

resources based on fixed percentages to states and major urban areas must finally be eliminated. Congress should consider a forced federal funding model similar to the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process where agencies work with an independent nonpartisan commission that develops a proposal. Congress and the President have the power only to accept or reject the whole proposal without amendment.

States should take the lead in codifying the Targeted Capabilities List (TCL) established by DHS to identify the highest-priority needs for disaster response. They should require biennial risk and capabilities assessments to identify capability gaps and ensure that grant fund applications do not request any capability not listed in the TCL or exceed the capabilities that are deemed essential. Because every state or locality faces unique challenges, it is critical to develop a tier structure that helps states and localities to identify the appropriate level of security they need so that jurisdictions neither overinvest nor underinvest in capabilities.

All communities must be assisted in developing a base level of preparedness. All communities face the threat of pandemic diseases and recurring natural disasters. The federal government should highlight best practices and develop and promote baseline community preparedness standards. A good example is the Council for Excellence in Government’s “Readiness Quotient” index.¹⁹

- **Revise National Disaster Scenarios to include armed assaults.** The Department of Homeland Security uses 15 disaster planning scenarios that include both natural disasters and terrorist attacks to identify common capabilities needed by responders and to serve as a focus for plan-

17. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Information Sharing Environment Implementation Plan,” November 2006, at <http://www.ise.gov/docs/reports/ise-impplan-200611.pdf> (December 4, 2008).

18. Jena Baker McNeill, “Removing FEMA from DHS Would Be a Terrible Mistake,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2071, September 22, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2071.cfm>.

19. David Heyman and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., “Homeland Security 3.0: Building a National Enterprise to Keep America Safe, Free, and Prosperous,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 23, September 18, 2008, pp. 7–8, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/sr23.cfm>.

ning and training exercises at the federal, state, and local levels. These scenarios should be revised to include armed assault responses.²⁰

The Best Response

In the future, terrorists may use armed assaults or any number of other tactics to murder innocents and disrupt the peace and prosperity of America. The best response to these potential dangers is persistent vigilance through counterterrorism pro-

grams as well as continuing to build a national homeland security system that can deal equally well with both natural and manmade disasters.

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20. Homeland Security Council, "Planning Scenarios: Executive Summaries," July 2004, at http://www.scd.state.hi.us/grant_docs/National_Planning_Scenarios_ExecSummaries_ver2.pdf (December 4, 2008).