

Suicide Attacks: Are we still at risk?

While the targeted killings of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and the high profile Yemeni terrorist Anwar al-Awlaki will have significantly impacted Al Qaida , it would appear that the threat of terrorism in general and suicide bombings in particular, remains high in the Free World.

This article aims to provide a number of examples of recent thwarted or botched suicide attacks. The purpose for providing details into these case studies is to highlight the fact that while these attacks were not successfully carried out and may not have made significant headlines in the media, together, they represent an increasing trend in the use of suicide terror as a tactic in the West. Additionally, this article provides a series of relevant insights and recommendations that can be derived from analysis of these events in order to better prepare security personnel to face this serious problem.

A very recent example of this threat was exposed on September 18th 2011, when 6 men were arrested in Birmingham, UK, on suspicion of having links and being involved in planning suicide terrorism. Two of the men, Irfan Nassar and Irfan Khalid, had gone as far as having made martyrdom videos. Experience has shown that this is usually the final step before actually carrying out a suicide attack. Counter-Terrorist agencies are fully aware that when martyrdom videos are made the attack is imminent. According to reports, the men had links to Al-Qaeda and were being tracked by the MI5 for several months. Although making the headlines in the UK, not much else was heard around the world.

This case demonstrates that the threat from Islamist attacks in the West has not lessened, despite the deaths of prominent Al-Qaeda leaders. While we seem to think of suicide bombings as a rare occurrence in the west, it is not due to a lack of effort by the terrorists. The whistle-blowing website WikiLeaks, earlier this year claimed that "MI6 officers believed that Britain was facing a wave of suicide attacks from British-based Muslim extremists who had been trained in terrorist camps in Pakistan."¹

To further enhance this case, according to British intelligence chiefs, there are around 200 active terrorists who are planning suicide attacks in London. According to the report, the citizens are living freely in Britain and are among 2,000 extremists who are actively seeking to plan and commit acts of terrorism in the UK.

This shocking statistic shows how big the threat of suicide terrorism is in the UK and the West in general. According to the Telegraph newspaper, one intelligence official said that "We may have only had one 'successful' suicide attack in Britain but the tactic remains an enduring threat. This

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/8815574/200-suicide-bombers-planning-attacks-in-UK.html>

is a generational problem we are facing. The terrorists are learning all the time and adapting their tactics. They now operate a cell structure and their security is very tight.”²

However, it must be noted that it is not just the UK and West that is experiencing increased suicide terrorism threats. The United Nations headquarters in Nigeria was attacked last August by a suicide bomber resulting in the death of 18 people. Uganda has also experienced suicide attacks, during the world cup where 73 football fans were killed.

Listed below are a string of thwarted and/or botched suicide attacks which occurred in recent years throughout Europe. They naturally did not have the same effect as ones which were successfully carried out. For example, the recent arrests in Birmingham failed to stir up significant media attention outside the UK despite the ominous dangers that these threats pertain. **However, when viewed as a trend these events should be seen as a worrying phenomenon.**

Sweden



On the 12th December 2010 Taimour Abdulwahab al- Abdaly intended to blow himself up along with a car full of explosives in a busy area of Stockholm, during the busy Christmas shopping season.

Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1981. He moved to Sweden in 1992 with his family where he graduated high school. In 2001, he moved to the UK to attend the University of Bedfordshire, for a BSc in Physical therapy. After his studies he attended Lurton’s Islamic Centre where he began to preach a distorted view of Islam. According to one member of the center, "Although we found his beliefs reprehensible, there was nothing to suggest he was about to commit a criminal act".³

At 1700 the gas canisters placed in a car parked in a busy shopping street in the area of Drottninggatan began to deflagrate. This event was followed minutes later by an explosion in a street about 300m (985ft) away that killed the bomber. Experts evaluate that the goal of al- Abdaly was a staggered attack. The first attack was to cause casualties, as well as attracting others (first responders and bystanders alike) to the scene. The walk in suicide attack was then to follow, aiming to cause maximum fatalities. This is a known Al-Qaeda strategy but thankfully did not come to fruition in this case. It is believed that due to a mistake by Abdulwahab, the bomb blew up prematurely



² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/8815574/200-suicide-bombers-planning-attacks-in-UK.html>

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11981228>

and only killed himself, while injuring two others. According to the BBC website, the Chief Prosecutor, Tomas Lindstrand claimed that “He had a bomb belt on him, he had a backpack with a bomb and he was carrying an object that has been compared to a pressure cooker. If it had all blown up at the same time, it would have been very powerful”.⁴

It should be noted that Sweden had never been subjected to a suicide terror attack and the country is generally identified as being very tolerant regarding its Muslim citizens and supportive of the Palestinian side in the Middle East conflict.

Denmark

A further example of a suicide bomb attempt was Lors Doukaiev in Denmark. Denmark has become the target of many terror plots since a Danish newspaper published a series of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammad in 2005.

On the eve of the anniversary of 9/11, 2010, Danish police arrested Lors Doukaiev in a city park with injuries to his arm and face. The man was planning to blow himself up in the busy commercial center of Copenhagen, but due to a ‘work accident’ failed to do so.



An explosion was heard in the Hotel Jørgensen, in Israel Square, in a bathroom that was being occupied by the suspect. The hotel is located about 100 yards from Copenhagen's busiest commuter and regional train station. Doukaiev unsuccessfully tried to blow himself up and then exited the hotel after sustaining his injuries. No one was hurt in the attempted attack. A further 40kg of explosives were found at his home, which if used for their intended purposes, would have caused many fatalities.

Denmark, like Sweden, had never been the target of a suicide terror attack.

Exeter, UK: Nicky Reilly

Another botched attack occurred on the 22nd May 2008, when Nick Reilly planned to detonate a bomb which he was wearing on his body in Exeter, UK. He had a history of psychiatric problems and had tried to commit suicide twice in his youth. He spent a lot of his time alone on his computer, which is where it is believed he became radicalized by Muslim extremists. In his late teens he was diagnosed with an obsessive compulsive disorder and it was around this time that he became infatuated with Islam. He changed his name to Mohamed Abdulaziz Rashid Saeed-Alim, and had a big poster of the twin towers on his bedroom wall, and his desktop computer.



⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/uk-11986036>

Reilly travelled 44-miles from his home in Plymouth to Exeter where he intended to carry out



the attack. The bomb was a 'viable' fireball-type device constructed of drain cleaner, kerosene, strips of aluminum foil and nails. The bomb exploded unexpectedly in the bathroom of a restaurant in a Plymouth shopping center, and Reilly was immediately taken into custody. Sylvia Bellamy, former Plymouth Councilor, who had known Reilly for many years, claimed that “someone has pushed

Nicky into this because I don't think he could do this on his own. He would follow like a little lamb ... Nicky has the mind of a ten year old, he is a gentle giant.”⁵

On the 30th January 2009, Nick Reilly was jailed for life and must serve a minimum of 18 years.

Bristol – UK

On the 17th April 2008 Isa Ibrahim, aka Andrew Ibrahim, was arrested under the Terrorism Act. The case of Isa Ibrahim was hailed as the first prosecution resulting from Muslim community alerting authorities. Ibrahim was suspected and found guilty of plotting to commit a suicide attack in a shopping center in Bristol, England. Being born into a Christian family he converted to Islam and changed his name from Andrew to Isa. He became radicalized by searching the internet and reading lectures from preachers such as Abu Hamza. Members of the mosque that Isa attended became wary of his behavior and informed the authorities. The case of Isa Ibrahim is an irregular one and may have marked the beginning of a new phenomenon in suicide attacks i.e. the lone wolf phenomenon.



In almost all suicide attacks around the world, the bomber himself is just a pawn in a larger game. A suicide bomber is recruited, radicalized, trained, supplied with an IED and selected target as well as other operational support. In other words, there is a significant terror infrastructure involved in carrying out a suicide attack. In this case, Isa had no known links with any terrorist organization but became radicalized online, made his own weapons from an online source and even made his own suicide vest which was found hanging on the back of his bedroom door. He was charged with the possession of an explosive substance, the intention to commit terrorism and the possession of articles for terrorist purposes. Detective Superintendent Nigel Rock spoke to the BBC and said ““We will never know what the consequences would have been had the community not had the courage to contact the police””⁶

⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1021502/Face-nail-bomber-Police-tailing-Muslim-convert-restaurant-attack.html>

⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8155978.stm

On the 17th July 2009, Ibrahim was charged and was sentenced to prison for a minimum of 10 years.

2006 UK: The Liquids Plot

The most significant thwarted suicide attacks took place in 2006, when British authorities foiled a terrorist attack that involved the targeting of as many as 12 passenger planes flying from the London's Heathrow Airport to San Francisco, Washington, New York, Chicago, Toronto and Montreal. The terrorists had planned to smuggle the components for making the bombs in small liquid bottles, disguised as beverages and creams and to assemble them when on board.



The perpetrators were planning to detonate the IEDs themselves. Abdulla Ahmed Ali, the ringleader of the plot, was sentenced to life imprisonment, along with 7 others who will all serve a minimum of 20 years in jail. These men had all made their own martyrdom video, which again demonstrates their intent to carry out these actions.

This is probably the most high profile case of a foiled mega-terror suicide attempt. Had the terrorists not been thwarted by counter-terrorism agencies, a major catastrophe would have occurred with thousands of people being killed, both on the planes themselves and on the ground below. It can be safely assumed that had the attack not been thwarted in an intelligence operation the attack would have been successful. This is due to the fact that the liquid explosives the terrorists were planning to use would not have been detected by the security measures in place at the time. Home Secretary at the time Alan Johnson was quoted by BBC as saying "this case reaffirms that we face a real and serious threat from terrorism. This was a particularly complex and daring plot which would have led to a terrible attack resulting in major loss of life."⁷

⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8242238.stm>

Insights

These attacks highlight a few very important points:

- 🏰 Suicide terrorism continues to be a preferred modus operandi of Islamist terrorists.
- 🏰 The rising number of thwarted attacks in the west appears to indicate that the phenomenon is spreading. It has also been spreading to additional counties in the African continent.
- 🏰 The modus operandi is used both for complex and large mega attacks like the liquids plot aimed at killing thousands as well as smaller scale attacks initiated by lone wolves.
- 🏰 The rise in the lone wolf phenomenon involvement in terror attacks in general would appear to be relevant for suicide attacks as well. This should be a significant concern for both the intelligence and anti-terrorism communities alike due to the fact that a lone wolf is not connected to known terror rings and therefore they are much harder to detect and prevent. Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly in Sweden and Isa Ibrahim in the UK are just 2 examples of individuals, without proven links to any radical groups who tried, and failed, to carry out suicide attacks. Having said this, the majority of suicide attacks are still carried out by cells linked to terror organizations.
- 🏰 The fact that several of the suicide bombers have been converts to Islam also has worrying implications. Many of the converts hold European passports and are able to move freely between countries. Both Isa Ibrahim and Nicky Reilly were converts and became radicalized on the internet. This is a tactic that the terrorists are using in order to recruit and radicalize unstable citizens in order to carry out attacks. Counter terrorism efforts must focus on both the virtual and real world. The internet is an important media that enables jihadist networks to recruit and radicalize individuals.
- 🏰 History has shown that intelligence plays an important role in thwarting suicide attacks but although being extremely important, it can't provide advanced warning for every attack. It is therefore critical that the security response includes both counter terrorism operations combined with anti-terrorism measures.

- 🏰 Although aviation continues to be a main target for suicide bombings, there has been a shift towards soft targets like hotels and shopping malls. Attacks on aviation such as the 2006 liquid plot or the 'underwear bomber' - Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab- demonstrates that aviation is still a preferred target for global terror however, we must note the trend towards soft targets.

Recommendations and lessons learned

Due to the increasing phenomenon of suicide attacks in West and other areas, it is vital that security and law enforcement agencies be aware of the threat and have an efficient and effective anti-terrorist/protective security contingency plan for this specific adversary modus operandi. The plans do not need to be implemented immediately but should be ready in case we unfortunately suffer a successful attack which will require a change in doctrine. The plans should be based on:

- 🏰 Specific anti-terrorism protective doctrines for dealing with suicide terrorism;
- 🏰 Facility hardening;
- 🏰 Public/ private security partnerships;
- 🏰 Dynamic security deployments aimed at early detection and facilitating effective response;
- 🏰 Providing relevant security personnel with proven behavior recognition tools;
- 🏰 Specialized training for dealing with this specific modus operandi;
- 🏰 Raising public awareness.