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## Profiling terror

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### Profiling terror

By Dr Andrew Silke

News of another terrorist suicide attack in Tel Aviv began to filter through on a Wednesday evening in April this year. Three people were killed and more than 50 injured when the blast occurred at the entrance of a beachside cafe. Although suicide bombers are nothing new in Israeli cities, the difference in this case was that the bombers held British passports...

Few are surprised when suicide bombers emerge from deeply troubled corners of the Middle East, but for them to come from the comparatively stable worlds of London and Derby seems to defy understanding...

In Western minds suicide bombers seem easy to categorise. Young males, with fundamentalist Islamist views, who primarily come from Arab countries, are a 'reliable' stereotype of the potential bomber. However, the stereotype is a clumsy one.

In the past 20 years, 17 groups in 14 different countries have used suicide tactics. In less than 400 attacks, they have killed more than 5,000 people, maimed at least 20,000 more and inflicted economic damage estimated at more than £70 billion.

In the West, security agencies have tried to take comfort from the fact that the main threat comes from Al-

Qaeda, defined by the Home Office as a terrorist organisation. It is thought that if we can develop an accurate profile of this group's suicide bombers, then we will be able to prevent the main threat. But again, the solution is not that simple.

To begin with, Al-Qaeda is not a traditional terrorist organisation. It does not have a clear hierarchy, military mindset and centralised command. At best, Al-Qaeda is a network of affiliated groups sharing religious and ideological backgrounds, but which often interact sparingly. Al-Qaeda is a state of mind, as much as an organisation; it encompasses a wide range of members and followers who can differ dramatically from each other.

Mohammed Atta, alleged leader of the 11 September hijackers, and Richard Reid, the 'shoe bomber' sentenced to life in prison this year, were both Al-Qaeda suicide terrorists. Both men operated during the same period, but in terms of country of origin, education, criminal histories, family relationships, employment records, intelligence and personality, these men were strikingly dissimilar. Yet both belonged to the same organisation and were committed to conducting suicide assaults against the West.

The belief that profiling can provide an effective defence also seriously underestimates the intelligence of terrorist organisations. These groups are not run by unintelligent people, and terrorists tend to be highly rational in how they plan attacks. They take steps to lower risks and do what they can to increase the likelihood that operations will be successful. When one obstacle is thrown in their way, they think of ways to circumvent it.

In Israel, bombers can change their appearance dramatically before suicide operations. They shave and dye their hair. They dress as tourists, orthodox Jews, soldiers and policemen. The old adage that they will always be male has also collapsed, as female bombers now account for a growing number of attacks.

498 of 1524 words

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