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Mall security guards learn to spot suicide bombers

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MANCHESTER, Conn. -- In a shopping mall outside Hartford, past the Abercrombie & Fitch and the cell phone kiosks, tucked away by the Barnes & Noble, a conference room full of security guards is learning how to spot suicide bombers.

They are being taught blast patterns and behavior profiles, how a bomb is packaged and how a bomber is recruited.

Suburban shopping mall security guards are receiving the type of training that just a few years ago was reserved for the Israeli police and the U.S. military.

"If they're carrying a bag, look for that white-knuckle grip. ... They're carrying that package and they're holding onto it for dear life," Patrick Chagnon, a Connecticut State Police detective and national counterterrorism instructor, tells his class of 10 students as the Shoppes at Buckland Hills mall bustles with holiday shoppers carrying bags and boxes of all sizes.

Chagnon's students are also told to watch for people wearing oversized clothes, and are instructed to make eye contact with shoppers and look for either extremely focused people or those who won't return a look. Another tip-off: Terrorists often ritualistically shave their bodies before carrying out a suicide bombing, he says.

Around the country, enrollment in these suicide bombing classes has increased in the past year, and the students include not just elite SWAT team members, but also local patrol officers and private security forces.

"Everyone has an obligation to be a soldier in this war," Connecticut Homeland Security Director John Buturla says.

In Israel, mall security guards, bus drivers and hotel managers are added eyes and ears for the police. That is what state and federal officials are trying to build in the United States.

In New York City, apartment doormen and supers are being trained to be on the lookout for cars or trucks that are parked outside for a long time; for anyone who takes pictures of the building or lingers too long outside; and for new tenants who move in with little or no furniture.

The International Council of Shopping Centers held about 20 anti-terrorism classes this year and plans dozens more next year, says Malachy Kavanagh, who helps organize training for the organization. A class of mall security directors recently received training at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va., he says.

"Our attitude is that everybody has a role: mall managers, engineers, maintenance people," Kavanagh says. "The more people you train, the more eyes you have, the more people you have aware, the better your opportunity to prevent things."

Such training frequently is met with skeptical questions: Is al-Qaida really going to attack a Connecticut shopping mall? Anti-terrorism instructors say a bombing is nearly twice as likely at a commercial establishment than at a government building or military installation.

"A mall is packed with people. Government buildings usually are not," says Uri Mendelberg, a former Israeli military official whose company, ISDS International, teaches a three-day, \$1,300 course on suicide attacks in Springfield, Mass. Mendelberg says about 60 people, including security agents for major U.S. corporations, have taken his class since it started last year.

Chagnon's lectures for mall security officials on how to prevent suicide bombings are paid for by the state and run about four hours.

"It will happen. You just need to make sure it doesn't happen here," he tells the security guards. "If terrorists know that 'Mall A' has good security and 'Mall B' doesn't, where are they going to go?"

An Associated Press reporter was allowed to sit in on the training, but the security guards were not allowed to be interviewed.

Some of the security guards questioned how much they could be expected to help, since they do not carry weapons and have no powers of arrest. But Chagnon told them their job is to alert law enforcement, and he assured them they could help thwart attacks by spotting surveillance teams and terrorism rehearsals.

"They're going to do a dry run," Chagnon said.

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