



Training Key® #581

Suicide (Homicide) Bombers: Part I

This is the first of a two-part series on suicide bombers. Part I covers profiles of suicide bombers and common beliefs behind committing a terrorist act. By profiling the suicide bomber, law enforcement personnel can better understand the types of actions associated with suicide bombers and can be better prepared to prevent attacks.

Introduction

September 11, 2001, is recognized as a watershed event in modern American history. On that day, nineteen members of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization engaged in strategic-level suicide bombings against the United States. By day's end, the World Trade Center towers were nothing more than twisted heaps of steel and concrete, one section of the Pentagon lay devastated, and the remains of the last hijacked plane were spread across a field in Pennsylvania. Roughly three thousand Americans died in the attacks, and their disruptive effects dealt a serious blow to our economy, with losses calculated in the tens of billions of dollars.

Exactly when the next suicide bombing will take place on American soil is unknown, but most counterterrorism experts believe that more attacks are a certainty. Experts also believe that they will happen sooner rather than later, and that they will take place with increasing frequency. Experience suggests that the next attack will not be as spectacular as that of 9-11.

Many people are unaware that in July 1997 Brooklyn police interdicted a double suicide bombing attempt against the New York subway system, seizing multiple explosive devices in a raid hours prior to the planned bombing. During the raid, authorities uncovered links to a terrorist group that had committed a double suicide bombing in a Jerusalem market. Another interdicted attack, possibly planned as a suicide bombing, was to take place on New Year's Eve in 1999. An Al Qaeda terrorist, called the "Millennium Bomber" by the press, was stopped and arrested at the U.S.-Canadian border. He was carrying explosives and planned to place a large suitcase bomb at the Tom Bradley International Terminal in Los Angeles.

Compared with other nations, such as Israel and Russia, the United States has been spared the horror of frequent suicide bombings. However, depending on developments in the war on terrorism and related matters, this situation could change. Embedded cells of militants with international ties to terrorism, as well as domestic terrorists, pose the potential for suicide bombings and other attacks.

Suicide bombings can be described as a blurring of crime and war. While they may appear more warlike than criminal, their effects are essentially the same, and law enforcement is faced with the challenges of preventing such actions and conducting postincident investigations. Law enforcement personnel need to recognize that, if encountered, a suicide bomber will behave differently from a normal street criminal and will actively engage police forces, as would any other "criminal-soldier" belonging to a terrorist or insurgent organization.

Modern suicide bombings began in Lebanon in December 1981 by the Shi'ia Amal group, which had links with Hezbollah upon the latter's formation. Radical Islamic groups refer to these bombings as "martyrdom operations," while democratic societies call them "suicide" or "homicide" bombings. Initially a Shi'ia activity, these bombings are now being conducted by Sunni and even some secular Islamic groups. Recently, a communist-inspired and even a Tamil terrorist group have also engaged in suicide bombings. Over the past twenty-five years, these bombings have spread across the globe, with incidents numbering somewhere around one thousand. In Iraq, multiple Al Qaeda affiliates and Zarqawi network suicide bombers target U.S. military forces weekly. On some days more than ten suicide bombings occur.

Much of what we know about the methods of suicide bombers is gleaned from these combat situations and other na-

tions' experiences. These methods are discussed in detail below.

Types of Suicide Bombers

Two basic types of suicide bomber exist—individual and vehicular. Each type has its own advantages and limitations in the eyes of the perpetrators.

- **Individual.** These bombers carry the explosive device either on their body or within an object. Bombers can carry explosives in vests or aprons, belts, satchels, backpacks, the sole of a shoe, and even bras and boxer shorts. Among the objects bombers have used to carry an explosive device are boxes, gym bags, briefcases, guitar cases, computers, TV cameras, birdcages, and even a watermelon. Because explosive devices may be so well disguised, innocent individuals can be tricked into carrying them. Underwater divers can attack ships with suicide satchels or limpet mine charges.

The major limitations of individual suicide bombers are (1) they can carry only a limited amount of explosives, and (2) they have a limited range on foot. Advantages of these bombers are (1) the logistical requirements to field them are much less demanding than those required to field a vehicular bomb, and (2) they can reach targets that vehicular bombs may not be able to threaten, such as very important persons (VIPs), commercial aircraft, and the inside of venues such as shopping malls.

No recorded use of cavity bombs (i.e., in the stomach, rectum, or vagina) exists, but this tactic represents a potential threat. Another area of concern is the use of “necklace bombs” (as used in Colombia, where they are placed around the neck of the victim) for terrorist hostage taking or forced suicide bombing, rather than for their original ransom-taking purpose. One of these bombs was used in August 2003 in the Erie, Pennsylvania, “Pizza Deliveryman” incident. In that incident, the victim, who was eventually killed by the device, was forced to rob a bank. Bombs placed on animals, a tactic used by Russian forces to destroy German tanks in World War II, have also been considered a possibility, but they are not currently regarded as a domestic threat.

- **Vehicular.** All motorized and nonmotorized vehicles on land, air, and sea have the potential to be turned into a suicide bomb delivery platform. Car and truck bombs are most common, but commercial airliners, motorcycles and bicycles, donkey carts, small sailing craft, speedboats, and even submarines have all been utilized or attempted. Concerns have also been expressed over the potential use of light planes, microlights, gliders, and small helicopters.

The major advantages of vehicular suicide bombing are (1) the ability to carry a large explosive payload, and (2) high levels of mobility. In addition, donkey carts and bicycles are valued for their innocent appearance (who would expect explosives inside a bicycle frame?), while a microlight might be useful for its ability to access a hard-to-reach target. Limitations of vehicular bombing are (1) increased logistical needs, and (2) the necessity of hiding the vehicle before its use in the suicide mission.

Be aware that suicide bomber threats can rapidly change. In one incident in Afghanistan, when a vehicular suicide bomb failed to explode, the driver left the vehicle wearing a bomb vest and then assaulted the target on foot.

Active terrorist groups that have engaged in suicide bombings use both individual and vehicular bombs. These groups include Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Al Qaeda and affiliates, the Zarqawi group in Iraq, the Chechens, Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and the Tamil Tigers.

Suicide Bomber Advantages

Operational advantages of suicide bombings over normal terrorist bombings include the following:

- **Superior dedication to the mission.** A suicide bomber is considered a *shahid*—a martyr who engages in jihad (holy war) and will, upon completion of the mission, bring honor to his or her family and organization and enjoy the benefits of eternal paradise. After individuals are selected to become a *shahid*, they go through long training sessions that determine their level of religious commitment, attitude, and ability to remain calm under pressure. Individuals who pass this indoctrination and training process should be considered fanatics who will gladly blow up themselves and others to reach their intended target.

- **The device is precisely delivered to the target.** The suicide bomber functions as a precision weapon, taking the explosive device right to the target. This is a dimensional standoff attack in the sense that the terrorist is “invisible” (stealth-masked) until the device is detonated, which helps overcome the Western advantage of standoff targeting and defense based on physical distance. Because the explosive device is guided by a human, it also has the ability to change locations at the last second in case the primary target is too difficult to reach or a better target of opportunity presents itself.

- **Harder targets can be attacked.** Targets that cannot be attacked by normal terrorist bombing techniques, can be reached. Heavily fortified compounds with proper standoff distances will not be damaged by normal terrorist bombings, whereas suicide bombers can crash through the front gate of a fortified compound or sneak in undetected and reach the desired target. Vehicular suicide bombers often use gaterashing to gain entry to a target.

- **The device has no window of vulnerability.** In normal bombing, when the terrorist leaves the explosive device at the target and then escapes to safety prior to detonation, there is a possibility that the explosive device can be found and moved or rendered safe. There is no opportunity for such defensive action in suicide bombing, given the ability of the bomber to self-detonate.

- **No planned egress is required.** The explosive charge simply has to be delivered to the target and detonated.

- **No one is left alive to interrogate.** Because suicide bombers typically are not captured, operational security of the terrorist group is better maintained. The Tamil Tigers use poison capsules as a failsafe method in the event of capture. Some Palestinian groups use a redundant, cell phone activated detonator that can be set off by calling the cell phone in case the suicide bomber attempts to back out of his or her mission.

- **No burden of wounded comrades exists.** Injured comrades create a logistical strain on a group. Suicide bombers do not typically survive the detonation of the explosive device, unless there is some form of malfunction.

- **Psychological factors.** Suicide bombers are blown to pieces, with the head typically being separated from the body

in the case of those wearing body armor. Witnesses obviously find this sight traumatic. In areas where suicide bombings take place frequently, individuals become concerned about the proximity of other people. Everyone in a crowd must be scanned for bulky clothing or watched for unusual behavior, such as walking away from a bag or package.

• **Bloodborne pathogens can be delivered.** Suicide bombers infected with hepatitis and HIV can create a hazardous materials (hazmat) incident by spreading disease to targeted personnel. Bone fragments and blood-covered bolts or nails may directly transmit pathogens from the bomber to nearby victims. Suicide bombers have also coated bolts and nails with rat poison (an anticoagulant) to cause additional bleeding in the victims. While these tactics are not commonly used and of questionable utility, some Palestinian terrorist groups have used both infected bombers and rat poison additives.

Tactical Employment and Operations

Individual bombers are usually employed in an antipersonnel mode because of the small amount of explosives they carry. Carried explosive devices typically range in weight from 10 to 35 pounds, while suicide bodysuits usually weigh from 1 to 20 pounds. On occasion, individual bombers can be used in an anti-infrastructure mode. Small amounts of explosives are more than adequate to take down a commercial aircraft, destroy a bus, or blow up a gasoline storage tank.

Vehicular bombers can be used in an antipersonnel mode but, with their larger payloads, are better suited for targeting infrastructures. Payloads can range from 500 to 1,000 pounds of explosives for cars and 10,000 to 20,000 pounds of explosives for a U-Haul or Ryder-type moving truck. Bicycle frames can carry very small explosive payloads, possibly a few pounds, while small boats and planes can carry payloads in the mid-hundreds to low-thousands of pounds. Commercial aircraft can carry fuel loads (in essence, an explosive payload) between 3,000 and 58,000 gallons (e.g., Boeing 747-400), along with sizable kinetic energy potential. Military barracks, embassies, skyscrapers, ocean-going vessels, and even entire troop convoys have all been attacked and destroyed by suicide bombers.

An overseas attack by a suicide bomber is generally well organized and requires at least four supporting teams: one that engages in recruitment and training, one that plans the mission and conducts surveillance and reconnaissance on the target, one that assembles the bomb, and one that provides the bomb to the bomber and takes the bomber to the target. While terrorist and insurgent groups typically act alone, the more recent trend within Palestinian groups has been for multiple groups to cooperate when conducting a suicide bombing.

Basic incidents involving one individual or vehicular bomber may take place. Complex incidents involving multiple bombers, secondary devices, or the addition of stand-up assault forces are common, though less frequent.

Generally, suicide bomber operations focus on the following types of targets:

• **General public.** Large masses of people in public areas such as mosques, markets, malls, nightclub lines, and restaurants, as well as people on public transportation, have all been attacked. In a terrorism campaign, people gathering in large groups are a primary target set. The 2002 Chechen rebel

takeover of a Moscow theater, which led to more than 120 civilian deaths, is one example of this type of targeting.

• **Police and military forces (including other responders).** Members of this target set have been engaged individually and in small and large groups. Police on the street, in their stations, and at their favorite restaurants have been attacked. The same goes for military forces on patrol, in convoys, in their command centers, and in barracks. In insurgency campaigns, this is a primary target set.

• **Infrastructure (including vehicles).** This target set is vast and includes vehicles such as trains, planes, and ships, as well as distinct industries such as power generation and finance. Nuclear power plants and the control rooms of major systems such as electrical grids are high-value targets.

• **Very important persons.** On occasion, individual suicide bombers assassinate government officials and other political leaders. VIPs are a much harder target to reach than the general public, police, and military forces. These bombers have reached their target by bypassing the official's security detail. Typically, this has happened when the official is exposed, such as when greeting the public or conducting a press interview.

• **Symbolic venues.** The 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon represented assaults on the financial and military centers of the Western world, respectively. Important monuments such as bridges, structures, and statues all fall within this target set. Even a middle school can take on a symbolic national meaning when involved in a combined school takeover and deadly suicide bombing incident, as took place in Beslan, Russia, in September 2004.

Suicide Bomber Preincident Indicators

Suicide bombers must possess both intent and capability before they can carry out their attacks. During the preincident phase, intent must be formed and preparation made to attack a specific target or targets. Intelligence is vital during the entire preincident phase. Surveillance teams may be difficult to identify, but if the same individual is repeatedly getting lost ("boundary probing") in off-limits or restricted areas, surveillance or spoofing (misleading surveillance) may be taking place. Cars parked near high-value targets (especially cars containing individuals using binoculars or telephoto cameras), which then leave as law enforcement arrives, indicate that active surveillance is likely taking place. Pretending to have a broken-down car, by putting the hood up, is another, less suspicious way many bombers conduct surveillance.

No suicide bomber profile exists—men, women, and adolescents have all engaged in this activity. Most commonly, bombers are unmarried males between 16 and 40 years old. To a lesser extent, females between 16 and 25 years old have engaged in this activity. On a terrorist group-by-group basis, much variability exists, as each group has its own tactics, techniques, and protocols. Chechen terrorist groups have used numerous female "black widow" bombers, whereas Al Qaeda has not. Suicide bombing operations conducted by families have also taken place. In one incident in December 2001, a father, son, and daughter jointly engaged in a multiple vehicular suicide bombing attack against a government headquarters building in Grozny.

Prior to the actual attack, suicide bombers seek to remain undetected by blending in with their surroundings. This defense, based on stealth-masking, is employed as they move

against the selected target. It may be recognized by observing subtle items or actions that appear out of place. While any one indicator by itself may not be cause for concern, multiple anomalies will signify a potential threat.

- **Behavior.** Does the individual act oddly, appear fearful, or use mannerisms that do not fit in? Examples include repeatedly circling an area on foot or in a car, pacing back and forth in front of a venue, glancing left and right while walking slowly, fidgeting with something under his or her clothes, exhibiting an unwillingness to make eye contact, mumbling (prayer), or repeatedly checking a watch or cell phone. To overcome nervousness, some suicide bombers are given drugs; thus, a person in a drug-induced state is another red flag. Other indicators include sudden changes in behavior—for example, a fanatically religious person visiting sex clubs (or the reverse), or an individual giving away personal belongings or suddenly paying off all debts.

- **Appearance.** Is the clothing, grooming, gender, or age of an individual out of place within the context of the environment? Examples include someone wearing a heavy coat or jacket in warm weather, overly bulky or loose-fitting clothing, protrusions under the clothing, or strange hair coloring (that is, badly dyed hair). Chemical burns on clothing or stained hands are other indicators. Of concern is the fact that suicide bombers have been able to blend in with their surroundings by disguising themselves to look like many types of professionals and civilians. Suicide bombers have appeared as military and law enforcement personnel, ambulance drivers, pregnant women, festival attendees, nightclub goers, TV camera crews, university students, and Orthodox Jews.

- **Smell.** Is the individual wearing too much cologne or perfume, or does he or she smell of talcum powder or scented water (for ritual purification)? Some military explosives are odorless, while other types of explosives have a distinct odor, such as a fertilizer or petrochemical smell. These odors are not detectable in the small quantities carried by an individual bomber but may be noticeable in the quantities utilized in a large vehicular bomb.

- **Equipment.** Does a briefcase, duffle bag, or backpack seem extra heavy or have protrusions or visible wires? When the individual sits down, is he or she overly protective of this item or preoccupied with it? The discovery of any combination of the following bomb-making materials suggests that an attack is being planned: gristmills, grinder banks, bottles of urine, chemicals, detonators, wire, nails, cell phones, and piping.

It should be noted that, in the case of individual bombers, some explosive devices are being created without metal fragmentation. This is an attempt by some terrorist groups to get past metal detectors. As a result, these devices rely solely on blast (heat and overpressure) effects and secondary fragmentation occurring from human bone fragments and shards of glass from nearby windows to cause injury and devastation.

- **Vehicle.** There are several things on or relating to vehicles to watch for, such as front and back license plates that look forged, don't match, or are missing. Other red flags include a vehicle trunk that is weighed down, a vehicle identification number (VIN) that has been removed from the dashboard, illegible or expired tags or registration, a specific make of vehicle or vehicle condition that does not fit into the surrounding neighborhood, prolonged parking in a nonparking spot, and parking in a central choke point.

Acknowledgement

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Suicide Bomber Profile

Following is a checklist for observing, reporting, responding and investigating suicide bombing incidents. It is not designed as a comprehensive or complete list of all considerations in these areas but is suggestive of the types of common concerns that may affect police and other emergency service responders.

A noted authority on terrorism¹ states that Israeli authorities and psychologists have carefully developed behavioral profiles that might help security personnel identify a potential suicide bomber. The following are among the most obvious signs of such persons according to this source.

- The wearing of heavy clothing, no matter what the season. Long coats or skirts may be used to conceal explosive belts and devices.
- An unusual gait, especially a robotic walk. This could indicate someone forcing or willing himself or herself to go through with a mission.
- Tunnel vision. The bomber often will be fixated on the target and for that reason will look straight ahead. He or she also may show signs of irritability, sweating, tics, and other nervous behavior. (The Al Qaeda terrorist Ahmed Ressam, who was captured at a border crossing in Washington state while driving a car filled bomb-making materials, caught the attention of authorities because of his excessive sweating, furtive eyes, and other nervous movements.)
- The appearance of being drugged. The suicide truck bomber who attacked the U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut in 1983 had been drugged before the attack and was tied to the seat of his vehicle.
- Signs of drug use—including, for example, enlarged pupils, fixed stare, and erratic behavior.
- Bags or backpacks (used to carry explosives, nails, and other shrapnel). The bomber generally holds his or her bag or backpack tightly, sometimes gingerly, and may refuse to be separated from it.
- A fresh shave—a male with a fresh shave and lighter skin on his lower face may be a religious Muslim zealot who has just shaved his beard so as not to attract attention, and to blend in better with other people in the vicinity.
- A hand in the pocket or tightly gripping something—this could be someone clutching a detonator or a trigger for an explosive device. Such triggers, which may be designed in the form of button, usually are rather stiff so that they may not be set off accidentally. (One Israeli acquaintance described how he and several guards shot a would-be bomber numerous times, but found his twitching finger still on the button—and still posing a danger, thereafter.)
- Evasive movements. It seems obvious that anyone who tries to avoid eye contact, or to evade security cameras and guards, or who appears to be surreptitiously conducting surveillance of a possible target location, may be a bomber.

Such profiles are valuable not only for law enforcement personnel but for all persons who work in security or related fields in facilities or other locations that are potential targets or, where intelligence indicates an elevated risk of a terrorist attack. Programs throughout the United States have successfully recruited key personnel within the community to act as additional eyes and ears for law enforcement. Mall security officers for example have been introduced to the above type of profile information in order to more effectively spot potential terrorist threats. Similarly, community outreach programs provided training to other persons who are in positions where they are more likely to interact with terrorist cells or operatives, such as car rental agents, truck rental agents, security storage operators, hotel and motel managers, school and hospital security officers, and related persons.

Endnotes

¹ Neil Livingstone, "The Detection and Preventions of Suicide Bombings" Total Integrated Preparedness Solutions, Volume 1, Number 10, May 18, 2005 p.1

questions

The following questions are based on information in this *Training Key*. Select the one best answer for each question.

1. Which of the following statements is *false*?

- (a) *Suicide bombing attempts have not yet been made within the United States.*
- (b) *Most of what we know presently about suicide bombings has come from experiences overseas in Israel and Iraq.*
- (c) *A major disadvantage of suicide bombers on foot is the limited amount of explosives that they can reasonably conceal and carry.*
- (d) *A major advantage of suicide bombers on foot is that they can penetrate targets not otherwise available to motor vehicles.*

2. Which of the following statements is *false*?

- (a) *The main advantage of vehicular suicide bombers is the ability to carry large explosive payloads.*
- (b) *Bloodborne pathogens can be delivered by suicide bombers.*
- (c) *Suicide bombers can and have penetrated heavily fortified compounds.*
- (d) *None of the above is false.*

3. Which of the following statements is *false*?

- (a) *Suicide bombers often target location where large numbers of persons gather.*
- (b) *In the precident phase, surveillance of a target is often performed.*
- (c) *Most commonly, suicide bombers are unmarried males between 16 and 40 years of age.*
- (d) *Females have not been used for suicide bombings.*

answers

- 1. (a) Suicide bombing attempts have been made within the United States.
- 2. (d) None of the statements is false.
- 3. (d) Females have been used as suicide bombers.

have you read...?

Samuel M. Katz, *Jihad in Brooklyn: The NYPD Raid that Stopped America's First Suicide Bombers*. New York, New York, New American Library (2005).

This book provides a detailed look at the suicide bombing attempts in New York and provides important lessons learned on both operational and tactical levels.

