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IN DEPTH: THE LONG SHADOW OF 9/11: Tightening the odds

Threat of terrorism has 'changed the whole security challenge' at casinos, says supervisor of security operations at Wynn resorts

By ALAN MAIMON
 REVIEW-JOURNAL



Dave Shepherd, former head of security at The Venetian, has published a book that advises companies on how to prepare for terrorist attacks or other crises.

Photo by [John Gurzinski](#).

From deep within the recesses of The Venetian, far from the din of the casino, Dave Shepherd praises the al-Qaida training manual.

Shepherd, who resigned this month as the hotel's head of security to take a job where he will help develop security products, said the text found in a terror raid in England helps explain the mind-set of terrorists who might view hotels as attractive targets.

"If you were a football team, you'd want to get your hands on the other team's playbook, right?" Shepherd asked rhetorically. "That's what this manual is."

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Shepherd, a member of a federal Department of Homeland Security task force that deals with the nation's key infrastructure, has responded with a manual of his own.



Bruce Gebhardt, the FBI's former second in command, is now senior vice president of global security for MGM Mirage. He keeps a close eye on terrorist events around the world.

Photo by [John Gurzinski](#).

In a self-published book called "Preventive Measures," former FBI agent Shepherd advises companies on how to prepare for terrorist attacks or other crises. He has a pointed question for his counterparts in the private sector: Is your company ready?

Las Vegas casinos officials hope they are.

In the five years since the 9/11 attacks, Shepherd and other security chiefs have added terrorism prevention to a list of priorities that also includes prevention of criminal acts and defense against civil liability. Security chiefs at the largest hotels maintain operations that cost about \$10 million annually for each hotel. By comparison, Clark County received about \$8 million this year from the Homeland Security Department for all of Southern Nevada's public-sector anti-terrorism efforts.

To help protect the city's economic lifeblood, hotels have added dozens of new security measures, implemented staff anti-terrorism training and employed new technology designed to identify dangerous people in a town with 17 of the 20 largest hotels in the world.

It is not the first time that a disaster has prompted a change in security culture at casino hotels.

The 9/11 attacks have done for terrorism-related issues what the MGM and Hilton fires in the early 1980s did for fire and building safety codes.

The security changes have been driven by the realization that an attack on one hotel would economically devastate an entire regional economy.

That new approach is badly needed, said Richard Clarke, the former White House counterterrorism director, who said that Las Vegas casinos have traditionally ignored a very real threat of terrorism.

"Security at casinos has been almost 100 percent focused on traditional crime and theft problems," Clarke said in a July interview. "I think there's a tendency on the part of owners and operators of casinos to throw up their hands and say they can't do anything" about terrorism.

Former Agents of Change

Terrorism awareness at many Strip casinos is being led by a cadre of former FBI agents with a background in probing the criminal and terrorist mind.

The former federal agents have traded positions on the front lines of anti-terrorism enforcement for desks in executive offices at buildings considered among the softest, or most accessible, of terrorist targets.

Three of the security executives left high-ranking positions at FBI headquarters after 9/11 to take very different jobs in the Las Vegas hospitality industry where, as Shepherd explains, "security must be balanced



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with freedom of movement."

Larry Mefford, the FBI's former assistant director of counterterrorism, who has supervised security operations at Wynn Resorts since 2004, said the threat of terrorism has "changed the whole security challenge" at casinos.

"We're doing some things here we never would have done prior to 9/11," Mefford said, citing the detailed anti-terrorism training his security officers now receive.

Mefford said his decision to leave the FBI was motivated by several factors, including his frustration with government bureaucracy.

"It drives you crazy," Mefford said. "It was so difficult to make headway there. ... I would have stayed if I felt I could have made a difference."

In his new role as security chief, Mefford feels he can make an impact.

"If the government doesn't stop the plot, who's left? That's what we try to do," he said.

Suicide bombings at hotels in countries including Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Indonesia since 9/11 have drawn great attention from the security bosses who give marching orders to nearly 8,000 security guards on the Strip.

They say these attacks by al-Qaida and its affiliates constitute a worrisome pattern and acknowledge that government can provide only limited assistance to protect hotels and other private companies.

Bruce Gebhardt, the FBI's former second in command, who became vice president of global security for MGM Mirage, said he is obligated to keep his security directors aware of global trends in terrorism.

With classified reports beyond his reach from the private sector, Gebhardt now collects and shares as much publicly available information about terrorism as he can.

One article he read prompted a recent memo about how terrorists could use suitcases to make improvised explosive devices.

Grant Ashley, vice president of security for Harrah's Entertainment and the former special agent in charge of the FBI's Las Vegas office, said his security staffs have learned to view once-mundane situations in a different and more threatening light.

"Ten years ago, if we saw a gym bag lying on the floor near reception, we'd think, 'Oh, one of our guests lost their gym bag,'" said Ashley, who also served as the assistant director of the FBI's criminal division. "It wouldn't be treated that way now."

At monthly meetings, the security chiefs exchange ideas and discuss threats.

Dave Staretz, supervisory special agent with the FBI in Las Vegas, said the former federal agents have been an important addition to the city's counterterrorism efforts.

"They know what the intelligence community needs in order to conduct investigations," Staretz said. "Having them in those positions can be a tremendous benefit to law enforcement."

Spotting the Bad Guys

Shepherd, who left his post as security director after eight years to join a company with a homeland security focus, said The Venetian has made more than 100 security changes to the property since 9/11.

But he thinks casino security is strong as much for what it doesn't do as what it does.

It is a flawed premise, he said, to focus on a person's race or ethnicity when trying to identify potential troublemakers among the more than 38 million annual visitors to Las Vegas.

Instead, the casinos have widely embraced a form of Israeli-style "behavioral profiling" that trains security officers to be aware of how people act, a technique that also is being used at some U.S. airports.

"You can't profile a person by race because terrorists adapt what they do and will just get someone who doesn't fit that profile," Shepherd said on a June day when more than 70,000 people from 100 countries gathered at the hotel for a gem show. "They're patient, they're resilient, they modify."

According to the tenets of behavioral profiling, security officers may be able to identify potential suicide bombers in the same way they can spot people who cheat at cards or who are lost.

A suicide bomber, for example, may wear unusually heavy clothing, have wide eyes and display fidgety behavior, Shepherd writes in his manual.

In order to detect problems before they happen, Shepherd said he trained his security staff in 17 different areas, including behavioral profiling, bomb identification and detection, and use of lethal weapons.

The weapons training is intended to protect a group of armed security officers against a gunman and to instruct them how to take emergency action until police arrive.

Another significant change in security involves what is being looked at outside the hotels.

Since 9/11, hotels have increased surveillance on the perimeter of the buildings to help detect whether a terrorist might be planning a future attack.

Call it surveillance of surveillance.

"We want to spot them while they surveil," Mefford said. "Is anybody watching us? Are there any indications that somebody is testing our security or collecting data in a way that looks suspicious?"

Mefford takes exception to Clarke's complaint that hotel security is ignoring the threat.

"He's totally wrong, totally misinformed," Mefford said.

But Wynn's security chief said he understands the difficulty of guaranteeing the safety of guests at facilities that seek to provide as few security hurdles as possible.

He said, "Are we equipped to stop a truck bomb attack? No, because we invite people to drive right up to our door. That's the dilemma of terrorism. Nobody's going to have 100 percent safety."

Behind the Scenes

When trained eyes fail, other tools are being used to detect criminal behavior at hotels.

Many casinos use computer software that sifts through vast amounts of data to detect potential criminals, terrorists or terrorist financiers who may visit hotels. The technology was originally used pre-9/11 to find possible links between casino employees and cheaters.

Out of caution, Shepherd routinely runs the names of wanted criminals through his hotel's database.

At Wynn Las Vegas, the threat of terrorism even prompted several modifications to how the property was built, said Jerry Keller, the former Clark County sheriff who worked under Mefford until Keller retired earlier this year.

Both men toured the property and suggested changes that could be made before the hotel opened in April 2005.

That input led to the placement of a barricade on the top level of the self-parking garage to deter car bombs, a "panic switch" that can immediately shut down the hotel's ventilation system, and an off-property site where business operations can continue in case of a catastrophic event at the hotel.

Mefford said the security staff also lobbied for additional equipment including X-ray machines at the hotel's receiving dock, a team of bomb-sniffing dogs, and a secure vault for suspicious powders.

And, of course, there are still the cameras -- more of them than ever.

The Wynn, for example, now has 2,500 digital security cameras that are monitored around the clock by four security officers, Keller said.

In all, Wynn has more than 200 security guards, Keller said.

Gebhardt at MGM Mirage said the process of improving security, or "hardening a property," can be as simple as moving around existing equipment or decorations.

"If I take that 500,000-pound pot and move it over 10 feet, I'm not going to stop a truck or car, but it might be a deterrent that will help get customers out of the way," Gebhardt said.

Hotel security procedures are meant to be invisible to the public, but the hotels have the ability to quickly implement emergency security plans if faced with a known threat.

These measures would dramatically increase the overt presence of security and would include barricades on the streets, restriction of vehicle and visitor access, and aggressive bag inspection and use of bomb-sniffing dogs.

Shepherd hopes it never comes to that.

"If I create security that parallels what they have at the airport, people won't want to come here," he said a few weeks before he resigned.

But terrorism expert Clarke raises a related question that highlights the post- 9/11 security challenge: "How many people are likely to go to Las Vegas if one or two or three simultaneous terrorist attacks occurred at casinos?"

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