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## Terrorists and Suicide Tactics: Preparing for the Challenge

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### Does Training Make a Difference?

There has been considerable discussion about the availability of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) training and the value of training that is provided to first responders. Hundreds of stories suggest that training does influence performance in real-world situations. Law enforcement officers, firefighters, and paramedics all report that they do things differently after training—they are far more sensitive to safety issues and employ more effective procedures.

In some cases, evidence suggests that training has saved lives by preventing the successful execution of terrorist attacks. The following quotation is taken from a letter from a fire chief in New Jersey to the program manager for training at New Mexico Tech, reporting on one of these incidents:

*On March 31, 2003, [our] Fire Department responded to a location for a "smoke condition" inside a building. During our check of the building for smoke, which proved to be negative, our members came across 14 one-gallon plastic containers containing an unknown substance. The on-scene commander requested our hazmat unit and upon their arrival they determined the substance to be urine. The Incident Commander did not think anything of it, nor did the police supervisor at the scene. However, one member of our hazmat unit who had attended your class stated that the urine could be a component of a bomb and, because of this, we brought in the FBI. Further searches of the house turned up an additional 20 containers and maps and train time schedules of the New York metropolitan area. The tenant of the apartment is presently in the custody of the FBI and their investigation continues. If it were not for your classes, this situation might have been laughed off as a "kook" but because of what the member learned, perhaps lives were saved.*

When American Airlines flight 11 struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, it appeared that a great tragedy—an accident of monumental proportions—had befallen a prominent New York City landmark. Minutes later—at 9:03 a.m.—when United Airlines flight 175 struck the South Tower, the U.S. public began to suspect that the tragedy was not an accident; rather, it appeared that the airliners had been used intentionally to inflict catastrophic damage to the two structures.

As the day unfolded, with the attack that followed on the Pentagon in Northern Virginia and the crash of United Airlines flight 93 in Pennsylvania, our earlier suspicions were confirmed. Foreign terrorists had successfully attacked the heart of the U.S. financial system and the U.S. military's worldwide command center, inflicting massive damage and thousands of casualties.

Radical Islamic terrorists had identified and exploited critical vulnerabilities in our commercial air travel system, then willingly died in executing their attacks.

### The Aftermath

The reaction of emergency response agencies to the devastation of September 11 was, in most instances,

exemplary. Police, fire-rescue, emergency medical, and other emergency response agencies sprang into action, performing at exceptional levels of competence and bravery. Thousands of potential victims were spared death or injury.

As organizations began the process of analyzing and evaluating their performances on September 11, a few important lessons quickly emerged:

- Terrorists who are prepared to die pose a unique set of challenges to intelligence and law enforcement agencies. For one thing, the absence of opportunities for egress from the attack site no longer serves as a deterrent to attack. A terrorist who plans to die has no need for escape.
- Terrorists are patient. They take whatever time is necessary to identify vulnerabilities for exploitation and hold off attacks until they are confident of success.
- Law enforcement agencies should expect the unexpected. On the morning of September 11, most security experts assumed that aircraft hijackings would unfold as hostage events designed to force concessions from a Western government. Although terrorists had previously attempted hijackings as a prelude to suicide attacks, those incidents had not been widely publicized. Security experts who were aware of those attacks had not formulated credible scenarios for planning and exercising U.S. emergency response agencies.
- Once suicide terrorists start moving toward a target, it is extremely difficult to stop them. Successful interdiction must normally occur earlier in the operational cycle.

In the aftermath of September 11, there was a flurry of activity designed to better prepare emergency response agencies to deter, prevent, and respond to catastrophic terrorist attacks. Much of that effort focused on security of public transportation, particularly the airline industry. When the use of suicide tactics emerged as a critical concern, security experts began using lessons learned from foreign experiences with suicide terrorism to forge an appropriate countermeasure program to prevent or deter future attacks. Palestinian extremist attacks against Israeli targets provided a focus for that analysis. Subsequent suicide attacks against ground transportation systems in Spain and the United Kingdom and an attempted attack against commercial aircraft departing from London have provided additional opportunities to learn from unfortunate experience.

### **Suicide Tactics**

Suicide tactics take one of three forms. In what is typically referred to as Type I attacks, suicide bombers carry an explosive device concealed in a bag, box, briefcase, suitcase, or similar container that "fits" in the target environment. In Type II attacks, bombers actually wear the improvised explosive device (IED). In Type III attacks, terrorists use a conveyance (automobile, aircraft, boat, etc.) to deliver the explosive device. In each case, the individuals responsible for approaching the target do not plan to walk away. They are prepared to be destroyed in the blast.

The September 11 attacks were Type III events, which pose the greatest potential threat to targets in terms of destructive power. Modern commercial jet aircraft flying at maximum speed and carrying a full load of fuel can cause far more damage than explosives in a vest or backpack carried by a lone suicide bomber. A truck or bus carrying thousands of pounds of explosives can cause considerably more damage than 15 to 20 pounds of explosives in a vest or hand-carried item.

Despite the events of September 11, much of the attention on suicide bomber tactics has focused on Types I and II scenarios, the kind of attacks routinely seen in countries such as Israel and Sri Lanka. Numerous foreign organizations have capitalized on this focus by offering training to U.S. emergency response agencies.

Much of this training has been useful in drafting new policies and modifying old ones to adequately address the changing threat environment. However, lessons learned in foreign countries do not necessarily apply in the United States without extensive modification. The political, legal, and cultural environments in Israel, Sri Lanka, and other countries that experience a significant suicide bombing threat are far different from those of the United States. What works in Israel and Sri Lanka often will not here.

### **The Training Solution**

In recognition of the need for training in the United States to prepare for future suicide tactics—training applicable and appropriate to our unique political, legal, and cultural heritage—the Department of Homeland Security asked the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology (New Mexico Tech) to develop a course designed to train senior managers in law enforcement, fire service, emergency medical service, and similar

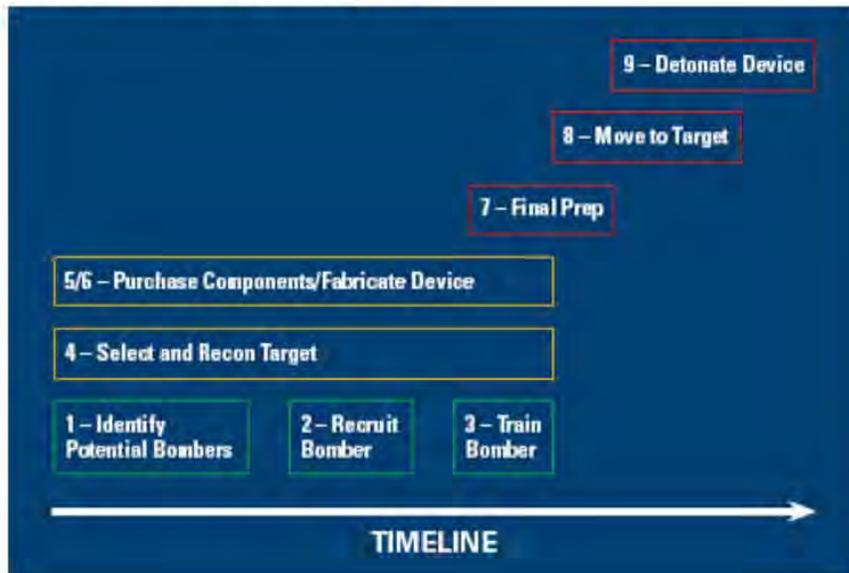
departments and agencies (at the state and local levels) to prepare their organizations for future suicide terrorist attacks against U.S. targets.

The development effort began in 2003, involving subject matter experts from a variety of academic and operational disciplines. The development team faced a daunting task: preparing this training without the benefit of an extensive historical base and with few credible, preexisting printed or audiovisual references. The development team spent considerable time collecting and reviewing what references were available; they also conducted extensive interviews with foreign subject matter experts and master performers to gain firsthand knowledge of tactics and techniques that had proven effective. A former Israeli police officer, with extensive experience handling bombing incidents in Israel (who was also a U.S. citizen and resident), was added to the development team. In addition, an attorney with extensive U.S. government experience prosecuting terrorist cases joined the development effort.

### The Approach

Focusing training solely on response was not an appropriate strategy. Although emergency response agencies must be prepared to respond effectively and safely to suicide bombing attacks, the greatest payoffs lie in preventing such attacks.

Figure 1. Suicide bombing operational process



As a consequence, a significant portion of training time addresses activities before the event: the detection of a developing threat and how agencies can disrupt the operational cycle before terrorists begin their movement toward a designated target.

The operational cycle for suicide bombing attacks can be viewed as a nine-phase process (see figure 1) that begins with identification and recruitment of bombers; continues through their training, target selection, purchase of components, fabrication of devices, final preparation, and movement to the target; and ends with the detonation of the device. As mentioned earlier, interdiction during the last two phases is extremely difficult. Law enforcement agencies must be proactive, taking advantage of opportunities for detection and effective interdiction during the initial seven stages.

Effective police intelligence programs have the potential to identify preparatory actions during the first three phases: identification, recruitment, and training of potential bombers. However, there are significant limitations on intelligence collection within the United States; constitutional guarantees and legal and cultural precedents constrain the ability of police and intelligence organizations to operate aggressive collection programs against U.S. citizens, independent of formal criminal investigations. As a consequence, recruitment and training can occur quietly, with little chance of detection by state and local law enforcement agencies. There is evidence to suggest that recruiting initiatives may be under way in U.S. prison populations and among radicalized extremists—including U.S. citizens—in a number of U.S. communities.

Perhaps the best

**Figure 2. As a part of New Mexico Tech's Prevention and Response to Suicide Bombing course, an instructor provides information concerning the configuration and functioning of a person-borne explosive device. The device is detonated to show participants the impact of even a small quantity of explosives.**



*Photo courtesy of the Energetic Materials and Research and Testing Center (EMRTC) at New Mexico Tech*

opportunities for detection and successful interdiction occur when terrorist organizations are selecting targets and conducting reconnaissance against them as well as when they are purchasing explosives components and fabricating explosive devices. Aggressive countersurveillance at potential or anticipated target locations is a critical component of any preventive program. In addition, close liaison with potential sources of bomb-making materials and components can often generate information concerning inquiries and purchases that warrant further investigation. The public plays a key role

in this effort; its willingness to report suspicious activity may be the key in early identification of preparations for a suicide attack.

### **Imminent Attack**

When final preparations are complete and a suicide bomber (often with one or more handlers) begins moving toward the selected target, law enforcement agencies will find it extremely difficult to stop the execution of the attack. Without prior warning (and a corresponding probable-cause determination), identification of a bomber poses serious challenges to law enforcement.

Even when a suicide attack is anticipated, law enforcement agencies may have a difficult time making the correct identification. Some indicators popularized in recent literature are tenuous and of limited practical use. For example, identifying a suicide bomber by looking for heavy clothing (inappropriate for the season and/or location) may not work; sheet explosives can be taped to the body and allow bombers to wear light clothing without any obvious, observable indicator of the presence of an explosive device. Likewise, looking for nervous behavior (darting eyes, unusual perspiration, etc.) may not work; handlers can administer Valium to suicide bombers to calm them and suppress obvious indicators of anxiety or fear.

Even when the attacker has been detected, the time available for effective response is normally constrained. The terrorist who drove a vehicle bomb into the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 drove through the perimeter and reached the building before Marine sentries could stop him.

### **The Training Program**

Despite problems associated with preparing for the suicide bombing threat, there are policies, tactics, techniques, and procedures that support effective response to this complex threat. In addition, there are items of equipment, training programs, and exercise regimens that support preparatory activity by law enforcement and other emergency response agencies and organizations.

These topics are addressed in the five-day Prevention and Response to Suicide Bombing Incidents course, developed by New Mexico Tech for the Department of Homeland Security. Training is conducted on the New Mexico Tech campus at Socorro, New Mexico, and at the Playas Training and Research Center, a town in southwestern New Mexico acquired in 2004 by New Mexico Tech to support Homeland Security training.

**Figure 3. A sample bomb whose design is based on actual devices used in person-borne attacks. The cellular telephone provides an alternative means for detonation of the device by a handler some distance from the actual bomber.**



*Photo courtesy of the Energetic Materials and Research and Testing Center (EMRTC) at New Mexico Tech*

Participants in the training observe actual detonations of suicide device designs (figure 2) and receive instruction in threat tactics unique to suicide bombing scenarios and appropriate, effective countermeasures.

It cannot be stressed enough how beneficial this portion of the training is to first responders. For the most part, knowledge of explosives has been limited to the bomb technicians assigned to municipal, county, state, and federal agencies. This training gives participants an opportunity to witness the effects of explosive devices commonly used by suicide bombers, including briefcase, package, and belt explosives (see figure 3 for a sample device), as well as car bombs loaded with 500 pounds of ammonium nitrate.

Members of the Garden Grove Police Department who returned from this training were quick to point out that a call to which they responded several months prior would be handled quite differently after the training. The sergeant in charge of this call realized that the perimeter established around a suspected explosive device was woefully inadequate. Had this device actually exploded, there would have been mass casualties, including police and fire personnel.

The Department of Homeland Security provides travel expenses and a per diem for all participants. Training is free to mid- to senior-level managers in state and local emergency response organizations who are approved by state points of contact. For additional information, visit the Web site [respond.emrtc.nmt.edu](http://respond.emrtc.nmt.edu) or contact the New Mexico Tech training program via e-mail at [respond@emrtc.nmt.edu](mailto:respond@emrtc.nmt.edu).

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