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Experts Say Suicide Mission in United States Is Inevitable Following London Attacks, Small, Insular Jihadi Networks Seen as Big Threat

By CHARLOTTE SECTOR

Jul. 18, 2005 - Suicide attacks have been around for decades, but the string of blasts that paralyzed London on July 7 marked the first time the tactic has been used in Western Europe. Experts say the bombings are a wake-up call to all European countries and the United States -- states geographically removed from conflict areas where suicide bombings are common.

Opinions differ as to whether suicide recruits would be homegrown or imported.

Bruce Newsome, a terrorism researcher at the think tank RAND, said the plot carried out by four men in London is a "likely model for future U.S. attacks." The bombers, all British citizens, had no criminal records, weren't on any watch lists and had no extremist pasts. (A fifth man, believed to be the mastermind of the plot, has been arrested in Egypt.) Tracking such potential perpetrators is nearly impossible because there are no warning signs, Newsome said.

For a long time, Brits reassured themselves that because the United Kingdom was liberal and a safe haven to fundamentalist Muslims, it would never become a target, Newsome explained. Although intelligence forces have been good at thwarting past attempts of attack on Britons, Brits still remain No. 3 on the al Qaeda hit list (after Americans and Jews), he said. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has been President Bush's closest ally in fighting the war on terror and in Iraq.

Typical Suicide Bomber Profile

Regardless of reasons, people were shocked to learn that homegrown recruits carried out the bombings.

Like anarchists, many jihadis are college-educated, middle class and often they seek a guru rather than a formal structure, said Scott Atran, terrorism expert and professor at the University of Michigan, describing exactly what police detectives discovered about the London bombers. Their hard-to-penetrate social networks consist of about 70 percent friends and 20 percent family, he said. They don't necessarily have a fanatical or violent past before they become "born-again" radical Islamists, and many are married. Most would-be suicide bombers Atran has interviewed said they're committed idealists on a mission to "save humanity" and restore dignity to their community.

Using humans as bombs has gained in popularity over the last couple of years. >From 2000 to

2003, more than 300 suicide attacks killed more than 5,300 people in 17 countries and wounded thousands, according to Atran, adding that more and more are religiously motivated. The numbers have drastically increased with the Iraqi insurgency opting for suicide bombing as the weapon of choice.

The first major contemporary suicide attack was the December 1981 bombing of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut. The next spate of attacks came in 1983 with Lebanon's Hezbollah party going on a rampage to kick the French and U.S. armies out of the country. Following in its footsteps, the Palestinian Hamas terrorist group has continued using suicide bombers in Israel. In Southeast Asia, the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka perfected suicide attacks by indoctrinating youths at an early age. Once the Tamil secured a measure of autonomy, the suicides stopped. The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks also stand out as a massive suicide operation in the United States.

Atran points out that since the start of the war in Iraq, self-forming, independent jihad groups have blossomed. He believes the London group is one of those decentralized "cells" acting more or less on its own. "The jihadist network is better prepared than ever to carry on without alleged al Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden," Atran said.

Coming to America?

It seems jihad has been growing in popularity with disillusioned European youth.

"Al Qaeda and the jihad movement provide the same attraction that communism did years ago," said Arnaud de Borchgrave, a terrorism expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Europe's huge immigrant population harbors massive discontent as unemployment rises among Muslim men and many of them feel marginalized, he explained. And it's a problem that's not going away.

Atran also blames the lack of mobility in Europe as a primary reason for young Muslims to seek out the jihadi cause. That's why he believes the real danger is not within Iraq or the United States but in Europe. "You've got sophisticated people with money and smarts and that's where the biggest threat is," he said. "There's no place for jihadi movement to take root [in the United States]." He believes it's much easier to become fully integrated in America and to climb up the social ladder than in most European countries.

Newsome disagrees. He says that failure to advance is not at the root of the problem. "It's relative deprivation as in 'I feel worse off than you' that causes this middle-class angst," he said. Newsome cited Osama bin Laden as a prime example of a wealthy, well-traveled man who felt deprived compared to the Christian elite. In his opinion America is as fertile ground as Europe is for jihadi terrorism.

His theory for a less-prevalent jihadi presence in the United States has more to do with immigration. Europe has 12 million Muslims compared to the United States' 2 million to 6 million, depending on various estimates. In addition, the United States doesn't have the huge influx of Muslim immigrants that Europe does, Newsome said, resulting in a smaller potential audience for violent Muslim fundamentalism.

Regardless of whether the talent is homegrown or comes from abroad, experts agree that suicide terrorism is bound for the United States. Just because an attack hasn't occurred since 2001, doesn't mean we shouldn't fear an attack, said Newsome. "Jihadists are extremely patient, they don't need to strike right away," he said, citing the eight years that separated the first World Trade Center attack and 9/11. Atran fears the next attack will be even bolder than 9/11 and may involve a nuclear weapon.

Analysts say taking up arms won't deter the next generation of bombers.

"Like pounding mercury with a hammer, applying raw military power likely won't do the trick," said Atran. "Get to know thy enemy instead of fueling the fire of would-be bombers by labeling jihadis as immoral and depraved annihilators," he said.

Atran adds that infiltrating terrorist networks should be the No. 1 priority, instead of dedicating all of our resources to the impossible task of defending every U.S. target.

All agree, however, that dedicating more intelligence resources is key to thwarting future carnage.

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