

suicide bombers



AP Photo/Mohammed Zaatari

Hamas suicide bombers, with simulated dynamite packets strapped around their chests, parade at a refugee camp near the southern Lebanese city of Sidon. The group members say they hope to carry out suicide attacks against Israel.

HOW TO STOP SUICIDE BOMBERS: WHAT MAKES THEM TICK?

EXPERTS SAY THE TIME TO STOP SUICIDE TERRORISTS IS DURING THE PREPARATION STAGE, NOT JUST AS THEY ARE ABOUT TO DETONATE THEIR BOMBS.

by **Marcy Mason**

As the number of suicide bombings continues to rise, the question of how to stop them has sparked grave concern. A NATO conference held in Lisbon in June concluded that suicide terrorism is the deadliest means of terrorist attack. According to the event's summary report, between 2000 and 2003, more than 300 suicide attacks in 17 countries killed 5,354 people and wounded thousands of others.

In 2004, the numbers continued to climb in areas such as Israel, Iraq and Russia. But the most lethal suicide attack to date occurred on U.S. soil when 3,002 people were killed on Sept. 11, 2001, by al-Qaida operatives.

Combating this type of terrorism is a tall order. "You can't always stop suicide terrorists," said Oliver Buck Revell, the former associate deputy director for investigations of the FBI who was responsible for the bureau's counterterrorism program between 1980 and 1991. "So what you try to do is have the best intelligence possible on the groups posing the threat, and then try to penetrate them through human sources and technical means to be able to preempt the attack."

revenge. In Chechnya, many suicide bombers are women whose husbands have been killed in rebel combat. Known as "the Black Widows," these women usually act out of grief, hatred and revenge. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka are separatists with a political agenda.

But religion is by far the number one driving force. Al-Qaida and other suicide terrorists who follow a radical, militant Islamic ideology are willing to die as an act of ultimate devotion in a defensive holy war or *jihad*.

"They think of themselves as martyrs. What motivates them is that they feel that they are doing something for a higher good," said Dr. Gregory Saathoff, a psychiatrist who is the exec-

For instance, in 1983, after a series of suicide truck-bombs killed more than 300 American and French servicemen in Beirut, both countries removed their troops from the multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon. Suicide attacks also are cost-effective, and they attract a tremendous amount of publicity, which magnifies the effect of the explosion and generates fear. The sum total gives terrorists an edge.

Too Late to Stop?

Stopping a suicide bomber at the detonation stage can be an exercise in futility. "We're deluding ourselves if we think there is some means that recognizes a suicide bomber at 100 yards and stops him before he gets to the tar-

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Experts realize that not all suicide attacks are the same. Just as terrorist groups vary, so do their recruitment practices, methods of attack, delivery systems and motivations.

"There are different motivations for different suicide operations. They cannot all be looked at as being identical," said Revell, who now heads his own consulting practice, Revell Group International. Religion, politics, grief, hatred, shame, revenge, ethnic nationalism, economic conditions and financial incentives all are motivators for suicide attacks. Which factors come into play depends upon the culture of a particular group and what is expected within that culture.

For example, Palestinian terrorists are nationalistic and often seek

utive director of the University of Virginia's Critical Incident Analysis Group, an interdisciplinary consortium that held a conference on suicide terrorism last April. "It gives them stature in their communities." It also secures them an immediate entrance to paradise, where they believe heavenly virgins await.

To some, suicide bombers may seem crazy, but Saathoff insists they're not. "These people do not have psychopathology in the way that we think of it," he said. "Because this is a seemingly irrational act, we often make the mistake of thinking that these people aren't rational. But if you look at the history of suicide bombing, it's an extremely effective way to take on a more powerful foe."

get," said Revell. "Most times you are not going to have the opportunity to observe behavior before the attack. It's going to occur before you even know that there is anything to observe."

Instead, experts say the time to stop suicide terrorists is during the preparation stage, while they're training, planning or being deployed.

"The best chance for us to prevent a suicide bombing is to penetrate these organizations," said Moshe Alon, president of Professional Security Consultants in Los Angeles, who served in the Israeli Defense Force and the Israeli Secret Service. In doing so, "we might be able to identify the suicide bomber before he acts."

In the case of al-Qaida, the organization works in multiple rings, said

suicide bombers



AP Photo/APTN

A Palestinian teenager stood alone at an Israeli checkpoint south of the West Bank town of Nablus on March 24, 2004. This television image showed him wearing an explosive-packed vest.

Alon. “It’s never one person. It’s the work of a group, and it’s well orchestrated.” Suicide bombers are hand-picked in religious schools at an early age. “They’re looking for the best students, the ones who have potential,” he said. Targets are identified by another ring. “There’s never only one target,” said Alon. “Al-Qaida’s signature is that they hit three or four locations so the

[resulting] confusion is much larger and the effect is much bigger.” Planning for attacks can take from two to five years.

Suicide Bombers in America

“The only way to prevent suicide bombers from coming to the U.S.,” said Alon, “is by having good intelligence and good communications with all of

the countries where al-Qaida cells have been identified.” To date, there are approximately 60 countries.

Most of the valuable intelligence is going to come from overseas, said Frank Cilluffo, director of the Homeland Security Policy Institute at George Washington University, who served as a special assistant to President Bush and was a principal advisor to Secretary Tom Ridge. The intelligence comes from people who have been arrested, seized documents, informants, consular offices, allied law-enforcement and security services, and various technical means of data collection. “The challenge is identifying the actual terrorists and their plans. Even when you do that, they have a tendency to conceal their identities.”

After Sept. 11, the profile of a suicide bomber in America was believed to be a highly religious, well-educated Middle Eastern male between the ages of 17 and 25. But experts caution against such a narrow mindset.

“Sept. 11 kindled a number of local groups in various parts of the world that now have international aspirations,” said Saathoff. Moreover, there is the potential for a homegrown suicide bomber. “Although spiritual and religious development within prisons is often extremely valuable in that it... promotes nonviolence, we have a small population of dispossessed, angry men in our prison system that have adopted a radical Muslim viewpoint that sanctions and advocates violence in the name of religion,” he said. “There have been some isolated cases that have sparked some real concern.”

Perhaps one of the most pressing questions is why hasn’t there been another suicide attack on American soil since Sept. 11? No doubt, some of the countermeasures that have been put in place have been effective.

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Society also has become more vigilant. Security now is trained to look for the unusual.

“There was a lesson learned from Timothy McVeigh,” said Revell. “We don’t let vehicles that contain 5,000-lbs. equivalent of TNT next to a facility that could be an inviting target.”

Other measures, such as cutting off the flow of funds funneled to terrorists through charitable organizations or businesses, also have been successful in thwarting additional attacks.

Still, there are other possible reasons. A forceful response in Afghanistan after Sept. 11 paralyzed al-Qaida’s home base. There is now better cooperation between the various security, intelligence and law enforcement agencies internationally and domestically. Plus, to a certain extent, “the terrorists have been on the run,” said Revell. “There have been a lot of arrests and detentions, not only in the United States but elsewhere, and that has disrupted their operations.”

The geographical barrier of the ocean has helped, too. “For the most part, terrorists have to cross borders to enter the United States,” said Alon. “But at the same time, this country is very vulnerable from Mexico and Canada. Why? It’s not because of resources. It’s because we choose to do so, and we’re taking a chance.”

Many credit the Patriot Act as being the key reason law enforcement has been able to perform so well. Without provisions such as the “roving

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wiretap,” which makes it possible to keep track of criminals and terrorists who use cell-phone technology, experts say the U.S. would be at risk.

“To lose these provisions [of the Patriot Act] would deny law enforcement the tools that would have allowed them to even have a chance to prevent Sept. 11,” said Revell. “It will put us back to 20th century capabilities when we need 21st century capabilities to go after the kind of terrorist that we’re facing today.”

When, Not If, an Attack Comes

As for future attacks, those appear to be a distinct possibility. “These people are patient, so we should not be lulled into a false sense of security,” said Saathoff. “Is there terrorist planning going on in the United States right now? The answer is yes.” And that includes other means of attack besides suicide bombings.

“They could take a gasoline truck, a boat, a train. Or dirty bombs are another option. They can do a lot more

things that are very effective and damaging,” said Alon. “It’s a no-gloves war. You have to go to the roots [of terrorism] and create pressure. If you know where they are, you have to take care of them.” ■

Marcy Mason is a Chicago-based freelance journalist who frequently writes about security issues. Her work has been published in the Chicago Tribune, The Wall Street Journal and numerous magazines.
