

Preparing for the Next Terrorist

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Articles & Testimony

Last weekend, a combination of good fortune and exceptional law enforcement prevented a potential tragedy in Times Square and led to the capture of the alleged attempted bomber before he could leave the country.

Next time -- and there will be a next time -- we may not be so lucky.

The startling and depressing truth is that eight years after Sept. 11, we cannot say with confidence that we are likely to prevent the next attack here. The reason is not insufficient attention, resources or effort. It's the fact that there is no such thing as 100 percent success in counterterrorism.

We need to get it right every day; our opponents need to penetrate our defenses just once. Indeed, this is not the first time we got lucky. Several plots since Sept. 11 -- think Richard Reid, a.k.a. the "shoe bomber" -- were not so much foiled as failed.

The takeaway is that fortifying our defenses at home and pursuing our adversaries abroad is not enough. We must also prepare for the attacks that succeed despite our best efforts to stop them. Fostering resilience within American society is not surrendering to terrorism. Quite the opposite.

These efforts prepare citizens to deal with the eventuality of an attack, so that society continues to function. In this regard, the rest of America should follow the lead of those hardy New Yorkers who returned to Times Square in force the day after the failed car bombing. Broadway shows were not canceled. Indeed, the show (read: life) must go on.

Several years ago, I attended a dinner in Israel with a group of senior Israeli counterterrorism officers when we were interrupted by news of a terrorist attack. The head of the Israeli delegation turned to me and challenged me to name any other industry where a 99 percent success rate is total failure.

Maybe soccer, he answered himself. If a goalie stops all but the winning shot, the one thing the public remembers the morning after is the goal that got past him. But by virtue of the constant terrorist threat facing their country, Israelis have developed remarkable resilience.

Fostering this kind of resilience is critical. Especially given the changing nature of the terrorist threat and the certainty that, sooner or later, one bomber will successfully penetrate our defenses.

On the one hand, improved offensive counterterrorism efforts have taken the fight to Al Qaeda along the Afghan-Pakistani border and reduced the capabilities of Al Qaeda and its affiliates to carry out spectacular attacks in the West. Fewer terrorist masterminds mean less capable terrorists attempting simpler, smaller -- but more frequent -- attacks. Al Qaeda's relative decline can be attributed, in part, to improved counterterrorism efforts.

Counterterrorism officials are far better at collecting intelligence on Al Qaeda than they were eight years ago, since both human sources and technical coverage have dramatically improved.

Consider the U.S. military's Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance Task Force, which has deployed unmanned aerial vehicles to "find-fix-finish" targets with devastating effect.

Of course, there are more worrying signs. From the American perspective, one big concern is the growing number of

U.S. citizens becoming radicalized and attempting to join the global jihad. Consider the cases of the Somali-Americans who have traveled to Somalia to fight with the terrorist group al Shabaab, as well as other Americans who traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan to join terrorists operating in those countries.

From Najibullah Zazi, the young Afghan-American charged with plotting an attack in New York City, to the attack at Fort Hood, the threat of homegrown radicalization is clearly on the rise.

From a law enforcement perspective, one reason the growing homegrown threat is so troubling is the lack of solid intelligence.

Michael Downing, deputy chief for counterterrorism and criminal intelligence with the Los Angeles Police Department, has noted that while U.S. counterterrorism efforts have greatly improved when it comes to information about foreign terrorist threats, homeland intelligence collection "remains inadequate."

Richard Falkenrath, who just retired as deputy commissioner for counterterrorism at the New York Police Department, has noted that it is difficult to prevent attacks by those who have not been in contact with others already on the government's radar.

In fostering resilience, we have much to learn from the Israelis, British and others who have long suffered terrorist attacks at home. Within hours of a suicide bombing, Israeli bus stops and cafes are rebuilt, cleaned and reopened. Society is trained to function; people are trained to cope.

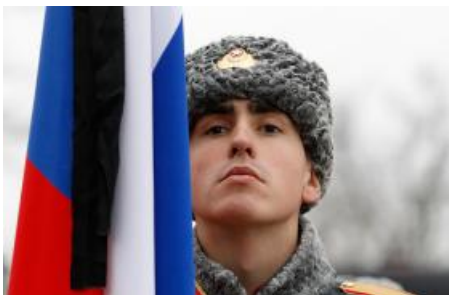
In Britain, counterterrorism efforts are guided by the British counterterrorism strategy, called CONTEST. Revised and updated in March 2009, the strategy focuses not only on stopping terrorist attacks and countering radicalization but also on preparing society for the inevitable attacks that are sure to succeed. The purpose, according to the CONTEST strategy, is: "Where an attack cannot be stopped, to mitigate its impact."

Next month, the Obama administration is expected to release its new counterterrorism strategy. Its authors should take a page from our British cousins and include plans to build resilience today in an effort to "mitigate the impact" of the bomber who might get through tomorrow.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11). ❖

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