September 11, Three Years On:

The Growing Trend toward Mega-Terror in the Middle East

by **Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)**

Sep 10, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.

Brief Analysis

In recent years, especially since September 11, 2001, several Middle Eastern terrorist groups have shown growing interest in waging mega-terror -- attacks that would kill hundreds, even thousands, of innocent victims, cause mass disruption, and profoundly affect the psychology of the targeted society. While not the first incidents of mega-terror, the September 11 attacks were the most successful. As such, they have been a source of inspiration for these groups, showing that it is possible to inflict mass casualties through the imaginative employment of means available to most terrorist organizations.

Perpetrators and Suspects

Groups that have shown particular interest in or carried out acts of mega-terror include al-Qaeda and its associates (e.g., the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi network), Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Lebanese Hizballah.

Al-Qaeda: Al-Qaeda and its associates have attempted numerous attacks of this sort using high explosives, including the first World Trade Center bombing (February 1993) and subsequent bombings in Kenya and Tanzania (August 1998), Bali (October 2002), Casablanca and Riyadh (May 2003), and Madrid (March 2004). Al-Qaeda has also assiduously pursued the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In Afghanistan, it produced poisons and chemical agents and reportedly tested them on animals at the Derunta camp complex near Jalalabad; employed a scientist to cultivate anthrax at a lab it was building near Kandahar; and operated a lab in Herat where it attempted to build a radiological dispersion device. In 2002, al-Qaeda sent an operative, Jose Padilla, to the United States to build and detonate a "dirty bomb." The organization has also repeatedly attempted to acquire special nuclear materials on the black market, in addition to seeking the assistance of two Pakistani scientists formerly associated with that country's nuclear weapons program.

Of al-Qaeda's associates, the network headed by al-Zarqawi bears special mention. In Afghanistan, he ran a camp near Herat specializing in poisons. With the fall of the Taliban, he established a camp near Khurmal in the Kurdish region of northeastern Iraq in conjunction with Ansar al-Islam (a local al-Qaeda affiliate), where he experimented with ricin and cyanide compounds. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, al-Zarqawi reportedly relocated to Falluja to spearhead the fight against coalition forces. He is believed to have masterminded the August 2003 bombings of the

Jordanian embassy and UN headquarters in Baghdad and the Imam Ali mosque in Najaf, as well as the simultaneous attacks on Shiite holy places in Kadhimiya and Najaf in March 2004 that killed some 150 people. He is also suspected in an Amman bombing plot thwarted in April 2004. The plot targeted the headquarters of Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate, the prime minister's office, and the U.S. embassy, apparently using an admixture of high explosives and chemicals to create a toxic cloud.

Hamas and PIJ: Since the late 1990s, Hamas has shown an interest in conventional mass casualty attacks as well as chemical and biological weapons. Hamas cells were implicated in the attempted bombing of the Pi-Glilot chemical tank farm near Herzliya in May 2002 and in a March 2004 attempt (in conjunction with the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades) to blow up a complex of chemical storage tanks in Ashdod that could have devastated nearby communities. It has also contemplated attacks to topple the Azrieli Towers in Tel Aviv. (It should be noted that both the radical leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine have tried to carry out attacks against the towers.) Hamas cells have also tried to poison Israeli water supplies and food in restaurants, investigated ways to disseminate cyanide agents in public places, used metal fragments tainted with rat poison in its bombs (perhaps to enhance their lethality), and considered the potential of biological weapons. As for PIJ, one of the group's operatives was arrested earlier this year for planning to poison the water supply at a Jerusalem hospital.

Hizballah: Hizballah, the original perpetrator of mega-terror (witness the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983), has in recent years assisted other groups attempting such attacks (e.g., the Khobar Towers bombing by Saudi Hizballah in June 1996). Hizballah has not publicly demonstrated an interest in WMD. Yet, the organization and Iran have a long history of collaboration regarding the most sensitive operations undertaken by either party (e.g., the Marine barracks bombing, the assassination of Iranian Kurdish oppositionists in Berlin in 1992, the Khobar bombing). Should Tehran need a surrogate to conduct a terrorist attack using WMD, Hizballah would be a logical candidate.

Future Trends and Developments

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the above. First, successful mega-terror attacks using high explosives require a degree of technical expertise, discipline, and skill in planning and execution that not all terrorist groups possess, especially if they are to operate against states with effective and experienced security services. Moreover, WMD terrorism requires a level of technical expertise that few, if any, such groups currently possess. For this reason, the support of a state sponsor may be critical to the success of WMD attacks. Second, radical Islamist groups in particular seem drawn to mega-terror and generally appear to have fewer inhibitions with regard to inflicting mass casualties on civilians than do leftist and secular-nationalist groups (though the latter two types of groups have attempted mega-terror attacks). Third, high explosives remain the weapon of choice for mega-terror attacks, largely because the materials for WMD are often difficult to obtain, assemble, and -- in the case of chemical and biological weapons -- employ effectively. This may explain why there have been so few WMD terrorist attacks in the past, and none that could be considered successful. It is much easier to obtain and use high explosives, whose properties are well understood and whose effects are relatively predictable. Nevertheless, WMD appear to retain a certain appeal despite the formidable obstacles to obtaining and employing them.

The risk of a successful WMD terrorist attack would be greatly magnified if certain states that possessed such weapons (e.g., Syria, Iran, Pakistan) were to provide them to terrorist groups. Thus far, there is no indication that this has happened (though it is not possible to speak with absolute confidence on this matter). It is unclear whether there is a normative barrier against doing so or, more likely, a fear of losing control over lethal capabilities whose use could prompt massive retaliation by targeted states. Yet, there may be circumstances in which a state sponsor could decide to transfer WMD to terrorists in order strike at its enemies while preserving a degree of deniability. It should

be kept in mind that nearly every WMD program in the world has benefited from some kind of foreign assistance. It should therefore come as no surprise if a greedy or sympathetic black marketeer or state sponsor does eventually provide WMD to a terrorist group.

Terrorist groups often share know-how, and this assistance sometimes crosses ideological, political, and cultural boundaries. For example, Irish Republican Army bombmakers have tutored their Palestinian counterparts, while tactics and techniques first used by Hizballah against Israeli forces in Lebanon are now being used by Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and by insurgents fighting coalition forces in Iraq. Therefore, the "tricks of the trade" required for mass casualty attacks (using conventional explosives and, eventually, WMD) will likely spread to a growing circle of terrorists as a result of both cooperative efforts and the merging or breakup of various terrorist groups. In the years to come, the task of impeding the transfer of technical know-how and WMD materiel both to and between such groups, as well as gaining actionable intelligence regarding such transfers in order to interdict them if necessary, will be among the principal challenges facing the United States in its war on terrorism.

Michael Eisenstadt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #896

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)