

Summary of Forum Held on August 25, 2006
Suicide Bombers: Are America's Local Police Prepared?

Summary's Highlights

Note: Hosted by the University of Pennsylvania's Jerry Lee Center of Criminology, this Forum was one in a series highlighting promising and pioneering state and local efforts to address crime.

A strong consensus among law enforcement officials holds that the next terrorist attack against the United States will most likely involve explosive devices, including those detonated by one or more suicide bombers. Such devices are relatively easy to construct, transport, and use. Beyond their potential to kill and injure innocent victims, they can inflict significant widespread psychological and economic damage, especially if multiple attacks occurred simultaneously throughout the country. Such an impact would be magnified enormously and entail incalculable cost if a chemical, biological, radiological, or other WMD attack were to succeed. Much money and emphasis is, therefore, given to counteract such a possibility despite current thinking that the more likely threat centers on explosives.

Al-Qaeda and others still have their sights set on the West, particularly the United States. Once recruited, suicide bombers often are supported in various ways by several people. That can make detection and apprehension easier than in the case of a bomber who is a loner. Radicalization of potential bombers, however, can be swift, sometimes in just months, stymieing timely detection—particularly if the general population remains loathe to report suspicious behavior to police. Critical to responding to suicide-bomber threats or incidents are advance planning, training, and interagency coordination and communication.

Forum participant Carl Peed—Director, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), U.S. Department of Justice—emphasized the value of the officer on the street in providing relevant information to officials responsible for policies aimed thwarting suicide bombings. Donald Van Duyn, Deputy Assistant Director, Counterterrorism Division, FBI, noted that suicide bombings will remain the method of choice for violent extremists and that they continually adjust to countermeasures. Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske stressed local concerns, including the need for much more antiterrorism training. Oklahoma University Police Chief Liz Woollen detailed lessons learned from a 2005 on-campus suicide bombing incident. Jeff Fuller, Bomb Squad Commander, South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, explained the operational modes, readiness, and accreditation of bomb squads.

Forum Executive Director Laurie Robinson reported that a foreign colleague once asked, “Why not just order police to undergo antiterrorism training in handling bombs, WMDs, and associated incidents?” When told that the United States does not have the equivalent of a Home Office or Interior Ministry to issue and enforce such a mandate but has about

¹ The Forum summarized here was one in a series to afford Capitol Hill and Executive Branch staff, selected representatives from the practitioner and research communities, and key interest-group leaders an opportunity to hear perspectives of state and local frontline criminal justice practitioners and researchers. The Forum was held in Washington, D.C. The moderator was Laurie Robinson, Executive Director of the Forum on Crime & Justice and Director of the University of Pennsylvania Master of Science in Criminology program. Ted Gest is Forum Associate Executive Director. Participants' comments are paraphrased unless placed between quotation marks.

17,000 independent local police agencies, the colleague was incredulous. So the structure of the U.S. justice system presents special challenges, she observed, especially when most experts believe that a violent terrorist incident is a matter of when, not if. Among other challenges: How should officials prepare the public to deal with such an event in a resilient manner, yet not raise false alarms?

COPS Office Antiterrorism Efforts: Carl Peed, Director, COPS Office

Shortly after 9/11, the COPS Office discussed with major law enforcement groups how to leverage resources to combat terrorists. Subsequently, the Office sponsored an intelligence summit, and, more recently, produced an intelligence guidebook. The Office stresses the importance of information sharing among law enforcement agencies and the value of the officer on the street in obtaining information and funneling it to antiterrorism officials.

Risk, Bombers, Bombs, and a Critical Countermeasure: Donald Van Duyn, Deputy Assistant Director, Counterterrorism Division, FBI

The enemy is committed to attacking the West, especially the United States. Suicide bombing will remain the method of choice for violent Islamic extremists. Their goal is not only to hurt the West but also to keep up the propaganda drumbeat aimed at their home audience, including through videos. Why has the United States escaped such a post-9/11 attack to date? First, Muslims are better integrated into America's society than is the case in Europe. Important to remember, however, is that some may be sufficiently angry to carry out suicide bombings and find others to support their efforts. Second, recruitment of suicide bombers in the United States is a difficult task. The lone bomber, one who has not involved others, is the most difficult to detect.

Bombers' "substance of choice appears to be liquid explosives," which is illustrative of how terrorists continually adjust their methods to counteract measures used against them. Israelis, for example, look for unusually bulky clothing that might indicate a hidden explosive. So terrorists there switched from solid explosives to liquid substances hung in satchels in pant legs to eliminate bulk. Al-Qaeda and others will keep coming at us and keep changing tactics.

One advantage helping to detect suicide bombers is that their recruitment is usually "a social affair." They need bomb experts, logistical help, operational assistance, and a social network to bond with and keep them committed. This increases the chances of penetrating suicide-bombing plots. Relying on law enforcement alone to pick up telltale signs of trouble is insufficient. A critical ingredient in preventing suicide bombings is communitywide participation, especially willingness by residents to report suspicions to law enforcement before, not after, bombings. Unfortunately, this will be difficult in the United States, where the general population exhibits an inherent resistance to informing police about their neighbors' activities.

But community residents must become more attuned to what is occurring around them. Signs of an impending suicide bombing are often so small that a communitywide effort to spot them is a must. Timely reports to police are critical: Some eventual suicide bombers

who had never gone to a mosque were radicalized in a matter of months to blow themselves up.

Local Preparedness and Concerns: Gil Kerlikowske, Chief of Police, Seattle, Washington

The good news is that much has been done over the last 5 years to help local law enforcement prepare, train, and think about suicide bombers. The FBI, COPS Office, and National Institute of Justice have provided such assistance, for example. The bad news is that this is probably not nearly enough, given that we have to be right 100 percent of the time but terrorists just once. A trip to Israel with colleagues provided insights about suicide bombers as did a day's lecture in Seattle by that country's Brigadier General Simon Perry, attaché and liaison officer to the U.S. and Canada..

The greatest concern is the home-grown suicide bomber, perhaps a prison convert or someone self-radicalized. The Seattle Police Department has reached out to the Muslim community and established a good relationship, especially after having apprehended a person involved in a mosque shooting. But self-radicalized extremists, who may learn bomb construction via the Internet, may not attend mosques or associate with those who do. Antiterrorism countermeasures implemented in one city may be opposed by residents in another and thus must be tailored to the local culture. The face of homeland security locally is the fire chief, police chief, and mayor. Among their tasks is how to communicate to the public and return peace, security, and equilibrium to the community if a terrorist event occurs.

Lessons From a Suicide Bombing: Liz Woollen, Police Chief, University of Oklahoma

On October 1, 2005, about 200 yards from the university's football stadium, where a game watched by approximately 85,000 fans was 2 minutes from halftime, explosives carried by a suicide bomber detonated, killing him but inflicting no other casualties. Two immediate concerns arose: panic among fans and a second explosion indicative of a coordinated attack. Neither occurred. The bomber was identified as a student who used the homemade explosive triacetone triperoxide, had constructed bombs since age 13, and was a loner angry at the world.

Six months before the blast, the 35-person Oklahoma University Police Department—85 officers on game days—had trained for this scenario through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Thus decisions were made quickly: tell game management not to issue "pass outs" at halftime, inform fans only that a law enforcement emergency occurred on the west side of the stadium, and notify them that if they must leave, use north, east, and south entrances. The game continued and concluded without problems, with the blast area remaining secure. Other than the value of advanced planning and training, lessons learned from the incident include:

- Essential to coordination and timely communication was a command post staffed by several police and prosecution agencies. The biggest help with this was already

having good relationships forged through the Joint Terrorism Task Force, comprising local law enforcement and the FBI.

- Important to an effective response to incidents is pre-positioning of needed resources onsite. The bomb team, for example, was present and conducts bomb sweeps before games.
- Necessary question to ask for a big-picture assessment: Is the local bombing part of a plan for imminent coordinated attacks elsewhere?

Bomb Squad Operations: Jeff Fuller, Bomb Squad Commander, South Carolina Law Enforcement Division; Chairman, National Bomb Squad Commanders Advisory Board

The Advisory Board, supported by the National Institute of Justice, is the accrediting organization for bomb techs/squads and sets training guidelines and standards—not policies. Many bomb squads are now accredited, outfitted, and equipped thanks to help from the FBI and its Hazardous Devices School and Bomb Data Center. When a suicide bomber situation occurs, it most likely will be a first-responder problem, not one for the bomb squad initially. First responders should be trained in what to expect and do in such cases. The frontline officer and perhaps fire department personnel would handle the situation before a bomb squad arrives. Bomb squad training involves bringing in Israelis and Brits as well as presenting suicide-bomber scenarios to bomb squad commanders and senior technicians who use the latest equipment to determine what works, what does not, and what needs improvement and how.

The first line of defense against an unrestrained suicide bomber does not involve the bomb squad: Does the police officer take or not take the shot? A bomb squad uses remote responses, such as through a robot or other tools, in situations when a bomber is injured or an explosive has been left in a vehicle. Another situation bomb squads can address at a distance is self-removal—when the bomber changes his mind, no longer wishing to detonate the explosive. Relatively infrequently, a manual or “cut the blue wire” approach may be needed, such as when a bomber is wounded. Bomb squads are present for post-blast situations, too. Most bomb techs believe the next terrorist attack will involve suicide bombers or large vehicle bombs—so cheap and easy.

Questions and Answers

Given a consensus that the most likely next terrorist incident here will involve explosives, is there alignment between the risk factor for explosives and spending so much on dealing with possible chemical, biological, or radiological events? **Fuller:** The impact of the latter set of events would be not so much in terms of casualties but would be psychological and economic. But so would the effect of 10 extremists simultaneously detonating pipe bombs in different stores, malls, or stadiums. **Van Duyn:** The country could absorb a lot of damage from individual suicide bombers. But the impact of a true WMD device could fundamentally change how our society operates. The cost would be so incalculable. It is the scale of what a WMD could inflict that is the issue. This explains the WMD spending emphasis. **Kerlikowske:** The first national exercise post-9/11 was in Seattle with a dirty bomb and simultaneously in Chicago with a biological threat. The radiological component of a dirty bomb would cause great long-term health-related fears

and major economic and clean-up issues. So we are in a position of training for all-hazards approaches. But the next incident will likely be an explosive device.

How do we train community members in how their behavior should change at an increased threat level, in what police expect from them on a continuous basis, and in what police must do? Kerlikowske: DHS tasked an organization representing the 56 largest police and sheriffs departments to devise a protocol or template, now widely circulated, indicating how the major cities should operate during an increased threat level. In Israel, the public is not informed about an increased threat level. In the United States, when the threat level increases, we ask the public to be more vigilant. But more vigilant about what? We have a long ways to go. Van Duyn: The message to the public must be consistent. A need exists to put the threat level in a context such that the public knows how to adjust behavior accordingly. But we must do that in a way that does not send a signal our enemies, which is why the Israelis do not publicize threat-level changes in an open manner. For us to alert the public in meaningful way involves obtaining an agreement from many agencies about how to achieve this—a very complicated task.

Have officers in Philadelphia—as an example of another large city-- received specialized training in handling suicide bombers? Forum attendee Philadelphia Staff Inspector Thomas Nestel III: No. We're too focused on dealing with hundreds of gun homicides this year. We'll worry about suicide bombers when they come.

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