

# TERRORIST THREAT INDICATORS

**By Richard Marquise**



*Photo: Scott Morrison*

On September 5, 1972, Palestinian terrorists from the Black September Organization entered the world stage at the Olympic Games in Munich. Before it was over, 11 Israeli athletes were dead and the world was forever changed.

In the following weeks, the United States Government received information that a terrorist attack would occur within the United States. FBI agents familiar with the threat from the enemies of the time, the Soviet Union and China – the Communists—were dispatched to prevent it.

Due to the large “Arab” population in the Dearborn, Michigan, area, agents began surveillances and conducted numerous interviews. Few of them understood the difference between Sunnis and Shiites or knew about the complex political situation in the Middle East. The police in Dearborn were unaware of the FBI activities in that community. The FBI believed it alone was equipped to deal with this threat, and since the information came from “intelligence” sources, it could not be shared. Fortunately we have come a long way since this time.

Today, there are approximately 13,000 FBI agents in the United States, not all of whom work terrorism. It is the great force multiplier of 800,000 federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement officers who will prevent the next act of terrorism. These officers may encounter terrorist indicators during contact with

the general public, through undercover operations, searches and car stops, as well as interviews, technical coverage and jail intelligence. Law enforcement analysts review large amounts of information and are a source of identifying pre-attack indicators. A knowledgeable general public can also identify and report indicators of terrorism.

Not all terrorists look like the 19 men who hijacked airplanes on September 11. They look like each of us. John Walker Lindh, José Padilla, or any of the terrorists who have attacked targets in Russia, east Africa, the Philippines, India, Jordan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Spain or the United Kingdom over the past 15 years are proof of this. While this makes an officer’s job more difficult, each must examine behaviors and activities, rather than appearance, to spot a terrorist planning an attack. Terrorists plan, collect intelligence, acquire materials and exhibit certain behaviors during this process, which, if recognized, could prevent an act of terrorism.

Throughout our nation’s history, terrorism has been prevented by state and local officers. In late 1987, the chief of police in a small Vermont town arrested three Middle Eastern men near

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the Canadian border. It appeared that these men had circumvented the border crossing and later provided conflicting information in response to the chief's questions. Investigation determined they were preparing to commit a terrorist attack in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Months later, a Japanese Red Army member was arrested by a New Jersey state trooper outside New York City en route to commit terrorist attacks.<sup>2</sup> The bombers of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City and the Atlanta Olympic games in 1995 and 1996, respectively, were arrested by state and local police officers just doing their jobs.

There are many challenges to preventing terrorism. These include target displacement, sleeper cells and the fact the threat is ever-changing. The solution is to understand the threat, collect information and share it.

Terrorist targets have changed. Historically, most attacks were symbolic,

not designed to cause mass casualties, but simply send a message that terrorists could strike at will. Nonmilitary government institutions have traditionally been targeted. Police stations in America were attacked by domestic terrorists in the 1960s and 1970s. In Iraq, law enforcement and nonmilitary government entities are daily targets. Approximately 17 percent of the 25,000 international terrorist attacks which occurred in 2005-06 were directed against law enforcement.<sup>3</sup> The Murrah Building was targeted by domestic terrorists. Military facilities and specific individuals have been targeted by domestic and international terrorists throughout history. FBI Director Robert S. Mueller, in Congressional testimony, stated that future attacks will be against "economic targets such as aviation, the energy sector and mass transit; soft targets such as large public gatherings; and symbolic targets, such as monuments and government buildings."<sup>4</sup>

United States law enforcement has had the al Qaeda manual or "playbook" for more than a decade. First discovered in the mid-1990s, one version says the best targets for spreading fear in the U.S. and Europe include skyscrapers, nuclear plants, and crowded football stadiums. It discusses hitting sites of sentimental value, including the Statue of Liberty, Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower, to generate intense publicity. Their targets include Jewish organizations and large gatherings to cause as many deaths as possible. This manual stipulates the strikes must be strong and have a wide impact on the population.<sup>5</sup> Their tactics are also outlined in the manual and include gathering information about the enemy (intelligence collection), kidnapping and assassinating enemy personnel, and how to respond to law enforcement contacts. Other sections are devoted to

finding the ideal apartment and forging documents, as well as training in making chemical and biological weapons.<sup>6</sup> Every law enforcement officer should read this manual, a version of which is available on the Internet, in order to "know the enemy."

Terrorists are opportunistic and will strike where we are vulnerable and inattentive, much as we were on September 11. The planning stage is the best opportunity to prevent attacks, and it is through the recognition of indicators that law enforcement can stop an attack. Just as terrorists learn from previous attacks, law enforcement can study their methods to prevent future attacks.

Terrorists surveil their targets. During an officer's daily work, he or she may see unusual cameras, night-vision equipment, maps with targets highlighted, blueprints and law enforcement or terrorist training manuals. Officers may notice individuals loitering near or photographing potential targets. During 2004, officers from Baltimore County, Maryland, noticed individuals videotaping on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, a major east-coast route. They tried to conceal their activities, but the officers spoke with them and shared the information with the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF). Investigation determined the driver of their vehicle was a co-conspirator in a 15-year scheme to finance terrorist activities in Israel for Hamas, a Palestinian terrorist organization.<sup>7</sup> Although Hamas has never conducted an attack in the United States, we have been a major source of funds for them. However, as the U.S. Government increasingly restricts fundraising, groups like Hamas have less and less reason not to conduct an attack.

During the past several years, automatic weapons attacks have replaced bombings as the number one weapon of choice for international terrorist

organizations.<sup>8</sup> If officers receive reports of thefts or unusual sales of weapons or ammunition, these should be shared with the JTTF. The same is true for reports of automatic weapons firing, theft or sale of body armor to non law enforcement, as well as any unusual paramilitary training. An alert officer in Skamania County, Washington, investigated reports of automatic gunfire shortly after 9/11 and reported his findings to the JTTF. This resulted in convictions of the “Portland Seven,” a group of American citizens who were preparing to go to Afghanistan and wage war on American troops.<sup>9</sup>

Since terrorists still use explosives to carry out attacks, any theft, sale or storage of explosive components should be shared with the JTTF. Vehicles are used to transport explosives, and reports about the modification of cars, trucks or limousines should be shared. The same is true if information is received about individuals undergoing emergency room treatment for missing fingers, hands or chemical burns. These may be indicators of terrorist bomb-making activity.

In the fall of 2005, a University of Oklahoma student detonated a homemade bomb outside the school’s football stadium during a game attended by more than 80,000 people. It is not conclusively known whether the bomb detonated prematurely, whether he intended to take it into the stadium, or whether it was his intention to wait until the game was over and kill passersby. The investigation turned up no connection to terrorism, yet this young man had attempted to buy ammonium nitrate several days before he detonated his bomb. The bomb he made with easily obtainable items was similar to those used in the 2005 London subway attacks.<sup>10</sup>

Technology has made the creation of identification documents easier and more difficult to detect. Legal documentation

is often easy to acquire through illegal means, but others counterfeit driver’s licenses, vehicle registrations and license plates, identification cards, social security cards, as well as immigration documents, visas and passports. Each document should be questioned and officers should look for alterations. Compare the individual with the photograph on the document presented. Ask where the document was obtained, and inquire as to citizenship and place of birth. If the officer is unable to ascertain whether the documents are legitimate, have an expert verify them.

Officers may come upon evidence that drug proceeds support terrorist organizations. The Madrid train attacks in 2004 may have been in part financed through the sale of drugs.<sup>11</sup> In South America, there is a close relationship between drug traffickers and terrorist organizations.<sup>12</sup> Because terrorists must finance their operations and most governments are making concerted efforts to seize assets and shut down fund-raising mechanisms, “routine” criminal activity is one way they can earn money.

State sponsors and nongovernmental organizations have historically funded terrorist operations. As governments have clamped down on these activities, terrorists have turned to various criminal enterprises. These include credit- and telephone-card fraud, trafficking in stolen property, counterfeiting, bank- and mail-fraud schemes, as well as selling counterfeit designer clothing, high end beauty products, CDs and DVDs.

In the late 1990s, a deputy sheriff in North Carolina was working security at a cigarette mart. He noted that some men were regularly purchasing large quantities of cigarettes. Engaging them in conversation, he learned they were taking them to Michigan where taxes were ten times those of North Carolina.



He initially reported this information to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF). Investigation soon determined these men were fund raisers for Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed terrorist organization, which, before September 11, 2001, had killed more Americans than any other international terrorist organization. The FBI and ATF worked together and brought down this group, a major Hezbollah cell, which had transferred \$8 million to the Middle East. The observations of one alert police officer had disrupted a major terrorist fund-raising cell.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to cigarette smuggling schemes, law enforcement officers should be alert for baby-formula and grocery-store coupon fraud, as well as individuals having connections to foreign charities.

Officers should also be aware of individuals having multiple forms of identification during car stops, contacts and searches. In addition, they should be alert for individuals having law enforcement or terrorist training manuals, radical literature, maps which have possible targets highlighted, as well as unusual photographs or decals and bumper stickers.

When interacting with an individual, the officer is the expert on the scene. Based on his or her experience, the official may see things that appear to be unusual. **If something appears unusual to the expert on the scene, it probably is** and should be shared with the JTTF if it appears to be terrorist related.

We have not seen suicide bombing in the United States, however, Pakistan had only one suicide bombing prior to 2007, yet had 59 attacks during that year alone.<sup>14</sup> Many believe it is only a matter of time before a suicide bomber strikes in our country. The Israelis have studied suicide bombers in depth and include the following as telltale signs of a possible

suicide bomber. They:

- Conduct boundary probing (how close can they get to the target?)
- Wear heavy clothing to hide explosives regardless of the season
- Display a robotic gait or nervously look around
- Show signs of tunnel vision and are not responsive to commands
- Give the appearance of being drugged
- Wear too much cologne or have other unusual smells
- Carry a large backpack
- Have wires protruding from sleeves or hands in pockets (for detonator)
- Have a fresh shave or make other attempts to “blend in.”<sup>15 16</sup>

While these indicators may be appropriate to Israel, other suspicious behavior outlined in this article may be more applicable to a suicide bomber in the United States. In 2004, the Capitol police in Washington believed if suicide bombers struck America, they would target the U.S. Capitol. That agency has documented a plan to deal with suicide attackers. Police officers receive comprehensive training on when and how to use deadly force. However, few are trained to deal with a suicide bomber. Every law enforcement department is encouraged to develop a plan to deal with a suicide attacker. This plan should be written and practiced, and every officer should be aware of its contents.

Almost every terrorist attack in history was presaged by indicators which should have been recognized and acted upon by law enforcement. Ahmed Ressam, the “Millennium Bomber,” was arrested in December 1999 by a U.S. Customs inspector. Ressam’s activities had been noticed by law enforcement and intelligence officials in two countries before he ever arrived at the U.S. border. An Algerian, he arrived in Canada via

France in February 1994, and although he possessed false documentation, he was welcomed and provided with social assistance. Ressam failed to appear for his immigration hearing and became involved in criminal activity.

A French magistrate, investigating the al Qaeda threat in France, told the Canadians about Ressam. Although the Canadians monitored Ressam and his colleagues’ telephone conversations, they did not consider them a threat. They learned that Ressam, who had acquired another identity, was on his way to “camp” in Afghanistan. He spent most of 1998 there learning to make bombs. Ressam returned to Canada via Los Angeles, and despite spending nearly a year in Afghanistan, and having been the focus of Canadian and French authorities, he was on no one’s radar. He drove to western Canada and began assembling his bombs at a motel. While there for several weeks, no one noticed that he left windows open, did not allow maid service into his room, and had strange odors emanating from the room. It took the last line of defense, an American customs inspector, to arrest him because numerous

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precursors were ignored.<sup>17</sup> She prevented a significant attack at the Los Angeles International Airport.

The events of September 11th have been widely detailed. Indicators leading to this attack began as early as the murder of Meir Kahane by El Sayyid Nosair in 1990. During their investigation, the New York City Police Department and the FBI recovered 47 boxes of documents, mostly written in Arabic. They were not translated or analyzed until after the 1993 World Trade Center attack. Some believe examining them could have prevented this attack. Ramzi Yousef, a Pakistani, had entered the United States a few months before with false documentation. Like Ressam in Canada, he had been allowed into the country. Working with a local cell, Yousef designed the plan which he hoped would topple both towers, killing 50,000 people. Following the attacks he fled to Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

In December 1994 terrorists in Algeria hijacked an Air France plane hoping to fly it into the center of Paris (one target

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in the al Qaeda manual is the Eiffel Tower). French commandos were able to kill the hijackers prior to their carrying out the plan.<sup>19</sup>

In January 1995 authorities in the Philippines encountered Yousef. He was plotting to destroy 11 airliners over the Pacific using an innovative liquid explosive. Yousef's partner later confessed to wanting to fly a plane into CIA Headquarters, among other targets. Yousef escaped but was arrested two months later in Pakistan. One of the plotters in the Filipino plan was Yousef's uncle Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11.<sup>20</sup>

In March 1995 the first of the al Qaeda manuals was found, which outlined the targets of the organization. Other copies were also found: in the United Kingdom in 2000, and then in Afghanistan in 2001. The manual stated that among their targets were skyscrapers, but the information contained in it was not widely disseminated.

In January 2000 intelligence agencies, including the CIA, surveilled a meeting in Malaysia of senior al Qaeda officials. Because information was not shared with American law enforcement, two of the men freely traveled to Los Angeles and San Diego, where they lived, attended local mosques and took flight lessons. On 9/11, they would be among the 19 hijackers.<sup>21</sup>

In July 2001 an FBI agent in Arizona documented that Middle Eastern men were taking flying lessons and that he believed they should be investigated.<sup>22</sup> For fear of being accused of racial profiling, nothing was done, despite the information contained in the al Qaeda manual, the documents seized in New York, and the events aboard the Air France flight and in the Philippines. A month later, another pilot, Zacharias Moussaoui, attracted attention in a flight

school in Minnesota and was arrested on immigration charges. Each of the above circumstances, taken individually, meant little. Collectively the entire plot could be seen. The 9/11 Commission report detailed the failures of American law enforcement and intelligence agencies to share information which may have prevented the attacks.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Chechens have tried to establish an independent Muslim state in southern Russia. In the early 1990s, Chechen terrorists invaded a school and later hijacked a school bus. Teachers and students in both cases were held for ransom.<sup>23</sup> Chechen terrorists also assassinated and kidnapped government officials, military leaders and soldiers. On August 18, 2004, the Russian security service reported that an attack by terrorists was imminent in North Ossetia (near Chechnya). On August 28 there were specific reports that terrorists had infiltrated the North Ossetian town of Beslan. In the week before the raid, three terrorist attacks, including two airline bombings, had killed 100 people. At 5:00 am on September 1, an informant in Chechnya advised authorities that an attack would take place at one of the four schools in Beslan that morning. Although the warning was target- and time-specific, as school opened at 9:30 a.m., 32 armed men and women overtook the lone, unarmed police officer assigned to guard the facility. The officer had no radio or cell phone. The siege ended on September 3 with the deaths of 31 terrorists and approximately 332 others, including 186 children.<sup>24</sup>

Each of these attacks may have been prevented if there had been proper analysis and sharing of information. Ressam should have been stopped before he reached the Washington-Canadian border. Two of the 9/11 hijackers

should never have been allowed to live unimpeded in the United States for two years. The Phoenix memo should have been perceived as an effort to conduct good solid investigation, not one for profiling. If authorities in Russia had taken the information they received in August and early September more seriously, they may have prevented the terrorists from taking over the school in Beslan.

Recognition of events before they occur can prevent acts of terrorism. Just seeing them will not be enough, however. Information has to be collected, analyzed and shared with the appropriate entity, the JTTF. There are now more than 100 of them in the United States. The JTTFs must also share information with their local, state and tribal counterparts. It is a two-way street.

There have been many successes in America and around the world since the events of September 11, 2001. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies have disrupted dozens of planned attacks, and many arrests have been made. However, disruptions get far less attention than successful attacks, and it would be incorrect to assume the problem of terrorism has gone away. No one can afford to lose focus and believe the prevention of terrorism will be handled by someone else.

Terrorism affects us all, regardless of whether we live in a major metropolitan area or a rural state. It is in our national interest to prevent the next act of terrorism, before anyone else loses his or her life, property is destroyed, and all of us are fiscally impacted. It can be done if the 800,000 federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement officers see themselves as a force multiplier and watch for indicators. In addition to the police, an informed public can also report suspicious activities. Once observed,



*Buildings are targeted as an opportunity for inflicting mass casualties. Photo: SSI*

information should be shared with the JTTF, as well as with each other.

Law enforcement and intelligence agencies around the globe should examine their relationships with each other. Every agency should put officers in a position to recognize the indicators of terrorism, then collect, analyze and share information to keep each of our communities safe. Federal, state, local and tribal officers, the great force multiplier, are our first line of defense against future acts of terrorism. Each can make a difference. ●

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