

Evolving Terrorist Threat

Long-term Trends and Drivers and Their Implications for Emergency Management

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Overview

There are several ways that terrorist tactics are likely to evolve in the coming decades:

- Terrorists may favor attack methods that exploit perceived vulnerabilities, such as adopting active shooter tactics and finding new methods of concealing dangerous materials
- Terrorists will continue to pursue opportunities to inflict mass casualties
- The nature of the threat from international Islamic terrorist groups is likely to change, particularly considering the Arab Spring and death of Osama bin Laden
- Homegrown violent extremism will likely continue to emerge as a significant threat

This document contains preliminary research conducted on behalf of the Strategic Foresight Initiative (SFI) on the Evolving Terrorist Threat driver. This research is intended to serve as a discussion point for further discussions, and does not represent a forecast by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This paper is a starting point for conversations around a highly complex topic, and SFI encourages feedback about this paper from the emergency management community.

SFI is a collaborative effort of the emergency management community that is being facilitated by FEMA. SFI was launched so the emergency management community can seek to understand how the world is changing, and how those changes may affect the future of emergency management. It will do so by encouraging members of the community to think about how the world may look over the next 15 years, and what steps the community should begin taking to thrive in that world. Participants in SFI include emergency managers at the Federal, state, and local level, subject matter experts on relevant topics, and other stakeholders.

Anybody who would like more information about SFI should contact the team at FEMA-OPPA-SFI@fema.gov.

Key Trends and Drivers

Terrorist tactics may shift to exploit vulnerabilities, including those against active shooter-type attacks and screening for concealed weapons.¹ Terrorist tactics tend to favor attacks that avoid effective countermeasures and exploit vulnerabilities.² For example, recent suicide operations have targeted countries' lack of experience and capability to respond to simultaneous and well resourced attacks, like those in Mumbai, or suicide shooters, like the Fort Hood attack.³ Both of those attacks featured tactics that resemble "active shooters," a situation which police are generally trained to cordon off an area and wait for paramilitary response units, like SWAT teams.⁴ In Mumbai, this paradigm was exploited by terrorists who laid siege to entire areas, carried supplies to extend the length of time they could operate, and attacked response teams.⁵

These sorts of attack methods have lower consequences than catastrophic chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) attacks or improvised explosive device attacks, but have a higher probability of succeeding. In addition, these types of tactics are hard to distinguish from traditional disasters. Responders to the first World Trade Center attack and Oklahoma City Bombing believed they were responding to accidents, while responders to plane crashes in New York City since September 11 have believed they were responding to terrorist incidents.⁶ Responding to conventional terrorist attacks can also be complicated for first responders, due to the possibility that secondary devices may be targeted at them.⁷

An additional tactic that terrorists have adopted to exploit vulnerabilities is to find new, seemingly innocuous places to conceal weapons, explosives, and other dangerous materials. Richard Reid concealed explosives in his shoes in December 2001, terrorists planned to conceal liquid explosives in soft drink containers, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab concealed explosives hidden in his underwear in December 2009, and bombs were found in toner cartridges flown from Yemen in October 2010. In each case, screening and other countermeasures were altered to try to reduce their vulnerabilities to these types of attacks. Drug smugglers and customs enforcers have engaged in a similar process where concealment methods evolve as new countermeasures are put in place.⁸ As terrorist concealment tactics evolve, this may force emergency managers and first responders to reconsider screening procedures during special events.

Terrorist groups will still pursue opportunities to inflict mass casualties. For example, terrorists continued to target commercial aircraft despite the employment of enhanced security measures at airports.⁹ The tactics favored by terrorists have become more lethal over time, a trend which could continue.¹⁰ The proliferation of advanced technologies throughout the world will provide terrorist groups with easier access to CBRN weapons, as well as to advanced conventional weapons.¹¹ However, some experts said terrorist groups are unlikely to deploy CBRN weapons successfully, pointing to failed attempts to do so in the past and a current preference to employ conventional weapons.^{12 13}

An increase in the number of terrorist attacks, or the successful deployment of a CBRN device, may also result in a decreased focus on natural hazards. During the Cold War, FEMA

concentrated more than three-quarters of its resources on preparing for a nuclear attack, which reduced preparedness for natural disasters.¹⁴ After the September 11 attacks, the Federal government deemphasized the role of FEMA and focused emergency management funding toward responding to terrorist attacks.¹⁵ The report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation and Response to Hurricane Katrina suggested that this focus on terrorism may have negatively affected preparedness efforts focused on other hazards.¹⁶

Global Islamic terrorism may not continue to be the primary terrorist threat to the United States. According to the National Intelligence Council, the history of other terrorist threats suggests that Islamic terrorist groups may become less significant or even dissolve over the next few decades.¹⁷ Previous terrorist waves (anarchists in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, anti-colonial insurgents in the early-20th Century, and New Left terrorists in the mid-20th Century) lasted about 40 years.¹⁸ The nature of al-Qa'ida makes it particularly susceptible to subside as a significant threat. Two key factors that contribute to the longevity—achieving strategic objectives and transitioning to become a legitimate political group—are unlikely because the group's objectives are to establish a global Islamic caliphate and topple Western-influenced regimes in the Middle East.¹⁹

The “Arab Spring” uprisings in the Middle East and the death of Osama bin Laden will have significant influences on global Islamic terrorism. There is a considerable amount of uncertainty regarding the impact of these events. Some regimes in the Middle East have supported the United States in suppressing Islamic terrorism, but also have been accused of not doing enough or even tacitly supporting terrorist groups.²⁰ There were concerns that new regimes in Arab countries could be friendlier to Islamic extremism,²¹ but there are also some who believe the opposite will be true.²² Similarly, there were concerns that the death of bin Laden may spur reprisals as well as assertions that al Qaeda was permanently weakened with his death.

Homegrown violent extremists are a growing source of concern. The number of cases where American citizens or permanent residents were radicalized and recruited to participate in Islamic terrorist activities increased sharply in 2009.²³ The Federal response to homegrown violent extremism is difficult, because the legal authority of some Federal counterterrorism tools, particularly those employed by the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community, may not allow them to be employed against American citizens.²⁴ Additionally, there is a continuing but low-level threat from other domestic sources of terrorism.²⁵ Between 2008 and 2009, there were 12 successful terrorist attacks in the United States, only three of which were linked to Islamic extremism.²⁶ The others were linked to groups with agendas focused on abortion, animal rights, the environment, or white supremacy.²⁷

The possibility of domestic terrorism could divert attention and/or resources from natural hazards. The Bipartisan Policy Center recommended that a Federal agency like the Department of Homeland Security be tasked with identifying radicalization and interdicting recruitment of U.S. citizens and residents.²⁸ In addition, multiple reports recommended further engaging State and local public safety officials, particularly police organizations, in countering terrorist threats.^{29 30}

Correlation to Other Drivers

- **Changing Role of the Individual:** A significant trend in this area is individuals affiliating with communities of like-minded people. This may facilitate the radicalization of American citizens. According to a report from the Homeland Security Institute, “the Internet plays a vital role in creating social bonds that are necessary for radicalization and recruitment, as well as providing a venue for perpetuating radicalization among groups of recruits.”³¹ This includes individuals who “self-radicalize” by seeking out terrorist organizations. Experts have raised concerns about the possibility that terrorist attacks perpetrated by radicalized Americans may be more successful and lethal due to terrorist organizations’ ability to connect to radicalized Americans remotely and provide resources and suggested tactics.³²
- **Global Interdependencies:** Globalization has increased the reach of transnational organizations, be they criminal or terrorist in nature.³³ As global connections continue to expand, the reach of these organizations will also have the opportunity to expand. Additionally, globalization has allowed terrorist organizations to become largely independent of former state sponsors.³⁴
- **Technological Innovation and Dependency:** Technological innovation is a double-edged sword in the world of terrorism. Networked video cameras, nanotechnology, and software designed to identify important intelligence information could become powerful tools for counterterrorism operations, increasing the effectiveness of antiterrorism countermeasures.³⁵ However, terrorists will also benefit from technological innovation. The diffusion of advanced technological capabilities could facilitate their access to CBRN materials, as well as advanced technologies such as guided missiles.³⁶ Advanced technologies could also increase terrorist groups’ access to radicalized American citizens.³⁷
- **Universal Access to and Use of Information:** During the Mumbai terrorist attacks, social networking websites Twitter and Flickr were initially reporting the events more quickly than western news outlets.³⁸ This raised several concerns, including public access to gruesome news and images, as well as the possibility that terrorists conducting the attack were able to follow the actions of emergency responders through Twitter.³⁹

Conclusions & Questions

Shifting attack methods may require emergency managers and first responders to alter response tactics.⁴⁰ How will first responders prevent themselves from becoming additional casualties during active terrorist events? How will the public respond if terrorist adopted active shooter-type tactics?

Terrorism competes with natural hazards for emergency management resources and attention.⁴¹ Would the response to successful terrorist attacks reduce preparedness for other

hazards? Alternatively, would a perceived decrease in the threat from terrorism reduce the homeland security resources available to emergency managers?

Islamic extremism is likely to change significantly over the next 15 years. Will the Arab Spring and Osama bin Laden's death increase, decrease, or not influence Islamic extremists' desire and capability to attack the United States?

The threat of domestic terrorism may result in increased counterterrorism responsibilities for state and local emergency managers and partners.⁴² How will the roles of emergency managers and first responders change as their counterterrorism responsibilities increase? How will the Federal government's relationship with state and local emergency managers change? What will be the distinction between law enforcement activities and counterterrorism activities? Will this lead to the "militarization" of law enforcement?

Social and technological changes will significantly affect the character of the terrorist threat. Will terrorist groups or counterterrorism organizations benefit more from advancing technology? How should emergency managers and first responders treat the possibility of attacks using CBRN weapons? What are the implications to emergency managers and first responders if more American citizens and residents participate in terrorist attacks?

¹ Dennis C. Blair, "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," Office of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, February 2, 2010.

² White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, February 2003.

³ Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat*, Bipartisan Policy Center, September 10, 2010.

⁴ David Ignatius, "The Next Mumbai," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Steve Kanarian, "An All-Hazards Approach to Terrorism," *Fire Engineering*, March 2010.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ U.S. Customs, "The Constant Change in Concealment Methods," *U.S. Customs Today*, July 2000.

⁹ Bergen and Hoffman, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat*.

¹⁰ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹¹ *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, National Intelligence Council, November 2008.

¹² Bergen and Hoffman, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat*.

¹³ According to the Worldwide Incident Tracking System, only 22 out of more than 71,000 global terrorist attacks were chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear events between 2005 and 2009. Worldwide Incident Tracking System (WITS), National Counterterrorism Center, <http://wits.nctc.gov>, accessed November 22, 2010.

¹⁴ George Haddow and Jane Bullock, *The Future of Emergency Management*, Institute for Crisis, Disaster, and Risk Management, George Washington University, <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/edu/docs/emfuture/Future%20of%20EM%20-%20The%20Future%20of%20EM%20-%20Haddow%20and%20Bullock.doc>, accessed November 23, 2010.

¹⁵ Lucien G. Canton, *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs*, a

¹⁶ *A Failure of Initiative*, Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation and Response to Hurricane Katrina, February 15, 2006.

¹⁷ *Global Trends 2025*, November 2008.

¹⁸ David C. Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, ed. Audrey Kurth Cronin and J. Ludes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ *Global Trends 2025*, November 2008.

²⁰ Alfred B. Prados, *Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues*, Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2004.

²¹ Mark Landler, "Obama Seeks Reset in Arab World," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2011.

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- ²³ Brian Michael Jenkins, “No Path to Glory: Deterring Homegrown Terrorism,” RAND Corporation, May 2010.
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- ²⁸ Bergen and Hoffman, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat*.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Treverton et al, *Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism*.
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