

Summer 2007: The Attack that Never Occurred

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The summer of 2007 was marked by threats and warnings of an imminent terrorist attack against the United States. In addition to the well-publicized warnings from Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and a National Intelligence Estimate that al Qaeda was gaining strength, a former Israeli counterterrorism official warned that al Qaeda was planning a simultaneous attack against five to seven American cities. Another warning of an impending dirty bomb attack prompted the New York Police Department to set up vehicle checkpoints near the financial district in Lower Manhattan. In addition to these public warnings, U.S. government counterterrorism sources also told us privately that they were seriously concerned about the possibility of an attack.

All these warnings were followed by the Sept. 7 release of a video message from Osama bin Laden, who had not been seen on video since October 2004 or heard on audio tape since July 2006. Some were convinced that his reappearance -- and his veiled threat -- was the sign of a looming attack against the United States, or perhaps a signal for an attack to commence.

In spite of all these warnings and bin Laden's reappearance -- not the mention the relative ease with which an attack can be conducted -- no attack occurred this summer. Although our assessment is that the al Qaeda core has been damaged to the point that it no longer poses a strategic threat to the U.S. homeland, tactical attacks against soft targets remain simple to conduct and certainly are within the reach of jihadist operatives -- regardless of whether they are linked to the al Qaeda core.

We believe there are several reasons no attack occurred this summer -- or since 9/11 for that matter.

No Conscious Decision

Before we discuss these factors, we must note that the lack of an attack against the U.S. homeland since 9/11 has not been the result of a calculated decision by bin Laden and the core al Qaeda leadership. Far too many plots have been disrupted for that to be the case. Many of those foiled and failed attacks, such as the 2006 foiled plot to destroy airliners flying from London to the United States, the Library Tower Plot, Richard Reid's failed attempt to take down American Airlines flight 63 in December 2001 and Jose Padilla's activities -- bear connection to the core al Qaeda leadership.

So, if the core al Qaeda has desired, and even attempted, to strike the United States, why has it failed? Perhaps the greatest single factor is attitude -- among law enforcement and intelligence agencies, the public at large, the Muslim community and even the jihadists themselves.

Law Enforcement and Intelligence

Prior to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the FBI denied the existence of an international terrorism threat to the U.S. homeland, a stance reflected in the bureau's "Terrorism in the United States" publications in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Even after the radical Zionist Rabbi Meir Kahane was killed by a jihadist with connections to the Brooklyn Jihad Office and "Blind Sheikh" Omar Abdul-Rahman, the FBI and Department of Justice denied the act was terrorism and left the investigation and the prosecution of the gunman, ElSayyid Nosair, to New York police and the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. (Though they were greatly aided on the federal level by the Diplomatic Security Service, which ran investigative leads for them in Egypt and elsewhere.)

It was only after Nosair's associates detonated a large truck bomb in the parking garage of the World Trade Center in 1993 that the existence of a threat to the United States was recognized. Yet, even after that bombing and the disruption of other plots -- the July 1997 plot to bomb the New York subway system and the December 1999 Millennium Bomb Plot -- the apathy toward counterterrorism programs remained. This was most evident in the low levels of funding and manpower devoted to counterterrorism programs prior to 9/11. As noted in the 9/11 Commission Report, counterterrorism programs simply were not a priority.

Even the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing made no real difference. Some changes were made, such as physical security enhancements at federal buildings, but they were merely window dressing. The real problems, underlying structural problems in the U.S. government's counterterrorism efforts -- resources, priorities and intelligence-sharing -- were not addressed in a meaningful way.

Prior to 9/11, experts (including the two of us) lecturing to law enforcement and intelligence groups about the al Qaeda/transnational terrorist threat to the United States were met with indifference. Of course, following 9/11 some of those same groups paid careful attention to what the experts had to say. Transnational terrorism had become real to them. The 9/11 attacks sparked a sea change in attitudes within law enforcement and intelligence circles. Counterterrorism -- aggressively collecting intelligence pertaining to terrorism and pursuing terrorist leads -- is now a priority.

Citizen Awareness

Before the 1993 World Trade Center bombing the American public also was largely unconcerned about international terrorism. Even after that bombing, the public remained largely apathetic about the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland. This was partly the result of the media's coverage of the 1993 bombing, which seemed to focus on the hapless, bumbling Mohamed Salameh and not the cunning and dangerous Abdel Basit (who is more widely known by his alias, Ramzi Yousef). Furthermore, the follow-on plot to that attack, the 1993 New York bomb plot -- for which Abdul-Rahman and some of his followers were accused of planning strikes against the Lincoln Tunnel and other New York City landmarks -- was thwarted. This led many to believe that the government had a handle on terrorism and that the United States was protected from such attacks. The second plot was thwarted before it could be executed, and most Americans never saw the gigantic crater (nearly 100 feet across) that the February 1993 truck bomb created through several floors of Building One's reinforced concrete parking garage. Instead, they saw only a bit of smoke billowing from the damaged building. The 1993 cases lacked the stunning visual displays of the 9/11 attacks.

The events of 9/11 also created a 180-degree change in how people think about terrorism and how they perceive and respond to suspicious activity. "If you see something, say something" has become a popular mantra, especially in New York and other large cities. Part of this stems from the changed attitudes of law enforcement officials, who not only have issued appeals in the press but also have made community outreach visits to nearly every flight school, truck driving school, chemical supply company, fertilizer dealer and storage rental company in the United States. Through media reports of terrorist plots and attacks, the public also has become much more aware of the precursor chemicals for improvised explosive mixtures and applies far more scrutiny to anyone attempting to procure them in bulk.

U.S. citizens also are far more aware of the importance of preoperational surveillance and -- fair or not -- it is now very difficult for a person wearing traditional Muslim dress to take a photograph of anything without being reported to the authorities by a concerned citizen.

This change in attitude is particularly significant in the Muslim community itself. Contrary to the hopes of bin Laden -- and the fears of the U.S. government -- the theology of jihadism has not taken root in the United States. Certainly there are individuals who have come to embrace this ideology, as the arrests of some grassroots activists demonstrate, but such people are very much the exception. In spite of some problems, the law enforcement community has forged some strong links to the Muslim community, and in several cases Muslims have even reported potential jihadists to law enforcement.

Even in places where jihadism has more successfully infiltrated the Muslim community, such as Europe, North Africa and Saudi Arabia, the jihadists still consider it preferable to wage the "real" jihad against "crusader troops" in places such as Iraq, rather than to attack soft civilian targets in the West or elsewhere. As unpopular as it is to say, in many ways Iraq has served as a sort of jihadist magnet, drawing young men from around the world to "martyr" themselves. Pragmatically, every young jihadist who travels from Europe or the Middle East to die in Baghdad or Ar Ramadi is one less who could attack Boston, London, Brussels or Rome.

Attitude is Everything

In late 1992 and early 1993, amateur planning was all that was required to conduct a successful terrorist attack on U.S. soil. In addition to the almost comical mistakes made by Salameh, serious gaffes also were made by Ahmed Ajaj and Basit as they prepared for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. However, because of the prevailing apathetic attitude among law enforcement officials and the public in general, those mistakes were not fatal to the operation.

Given the changes in attitude since 9/11, however, no operation conducted as poorly as the 1993 bombing would succeed today. Before the bombing, the FBI investigated the cell that carried it out, made the determination that the men were harmless fanatics and closed the investigation. That would not happen today, as even slightly goofy, wannabe terrorists such as the Miami Seven are vigorously investigated and prosecuted when possible.

When Ajaj and Basit flew into JFK Airport in September 1992, authorities pretty much ignored the fact that Ajaj was found transporting a large quantity of jihadist material, including bombmaking manuals and videos. Instead, he was sentenced to six months in jail for committing passport fraud -- a mere slap on the wrist -- and was then to be deported. Had authorities taken the time to carefully review the materials in Ajaj's briefcase, they would have found two boarding passes and two passports with exit stamps from Pakistan. Because of that oversight, no one noticed that Ajaj was traveling with a companion. Even when his co-conspirators called Ajaj in jail seeking his help in formulating their improvised explosive mixtures and recovering the bombmaking manuals, the calls were not traced. It was not until after the bombing that Ajaj's

involvement was discovered, and he was convicted and sentenced.

These kinds of oversights would not occur now. Furthermore, the attitude of the public today makes it far more difficult for a conspirator like Niday Ayyad to order chemicals used to construct a bomb, or for the conspirators to receive and store such chemicals in a rented storage space without being reported to the authorities.

Another change in attitude has been on the legal front. Prior to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, there were no "terrorism" statutes concerning the use of weapons of mass destruction or acts of terrorism transcending national borders. Instead, prosecutors in terrorism cases struggled to apply existing laws. The defendants in the 1993 New York bomb plot case were not charged with conspiring to build bombs or commit acts of international terrorism. Rather, they were convicted on "seditious conspiracy" charges. Similarly, Salameh was convicted of violating the Special Agricultural Worker program and with damaging U.S. Secret Service cars stored in the basement of the World Trade Center building.

The U.S. security environment has indeed improved dramatically since 1993, largely as a result of the sweeping changes in attitude, though also to some extent due to the magnet effect of the war in Iraq. Success can engender complacency, however, and the lack of attacks could allow attitudes -- and thus counterterrorism resources -- to swing back toward the other end of the spectrum.

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