

## Indicators of Terrorist Attacks

Anoop Chengara

### Executive Summary

Terrorist attacks in the world over the past five years have become more organized, widespread, more frequent and deadly. Their impact on society is so severe that it has become imperative to predict and disrupt terrorist strikes. Successful terrorist strikes share several common features – meticulous long-term planning, careful target selection, access to means of destruction, and efficient logistics support. Evidence of such preparations should alert law enforcement to an impending event. At [Bharat Rakshak Forum](#), a thread was dedicated to listing possible indicators of a terrorist attack. The thread was meant to be of use to the general public and to law enforcement agencies in identifying the patterns that presage a strike. Several suggestions were received on that thread, and this article sorts the suggestions into different categories – possible, likely and almost certain indicators (red flags). The list covers the patterns of movement and storage of explosives, financial transactions, appearance of publicity material and 'dry-runs' or rehearsals of the actual events. The material covered in this article is by no means complete; the author hopes that the article will serve to provoke an expanded discussion of the issue.

### Introduction

Terrorist attacks have become commonplace in most parts of the world over the past decade. While most terrorist movements have traditionally remained localized to conflict-prone areas, in the past 5 years or so, a global dimension has emerged to terrorist attacks and the scale and scope of attacks has expanded. Terrorist attacks have been delivered using unconventional means. The focus of the attacks seems to be on inflicting extremely large civilian casualties and causing lasting economic damage and in some cases influencing electoral results. There is an urgent need to be able to predict and pre-empt such attacks. An attempt was made at [Bharat-Rakshak Forum \(BRF\)](#) [xi] to list possible indicators of a terrorist strike. This article summarizes the discussion that followed and attempts to sort the indicators into a conceptual framework. Primarily, attention is focused on identifying the indicators of well planned, large scale attacks as seen in Mumbai (1993), New York (2001), Bali (2002), Moscow (2002), Madrid (2004) and Beslan (2004). Smaller scale attacks that take place everyday in insurgency-hit regions are not analyzed in this piece. The dynamics of these attacks tends to be influenced by local factors. Though it may be possible to extend the type of analysis done here to insurgency prone regions, this represents a different level of complexity and is therefore out of the scope of this paper.

In the aftermath of high intensity terrorist attacks, often clues have been unearthed, which if recognized in time, would have provided advance warning of the impending attack. For instance, in the case of the Black Friday Blasts in Mumbai (1993) explosives were smuggled by sea and stocked in private storehouses hired for the

purpose. Although villagers were aware of the increased frequency of smuggling, they did not alert the police because they did not connect it to a possible terrorist attack. Even the most basic detection work at that time in the villages could have prevented the Black Friday Blasts, which left six hundred people dead. While it may be possible to dismiss this sort of thinking as post-hoc analysis, or detection by hindsight, it is important to note that high profile attacks require long-term preparation, the best time to disrupt them is during the planning and preparation stages when the weapon of choice has yet to be assembled.

The major challenges in pre-empting terrorism lie in identifying the time, place and mode of attack. For most intelligence agencies the real difficulty lies in sorting through the raw data collected and separating the "noise" from the real warning signs. This task is made more difficult by the fact that every agency has limited resources and time with which to process the raw data. It helps therefore to look carefully at some of the common features of high intensity terrorist acts as this helps create some reasonable filters to eliminate noise in the raw data.

Let us briefly examine some of the common factors in terrorist acts today.

- **Choice of Targets:** Most high intensity terrorism seeks to attack the foundations of a state i.e. its political, military and economic infrastructure. The act itself may be punitive or symbolic. For example an analysis of the targets of suicide terrorism around the world shows that most attacks take place in public transport modes (30 percent), entertainment and shopping centers (24 percent), bus and railway stations (22 percent), military targets (21 percent) and non-urban targets (3 percent), a pattern that coincides with population density [vi].
- **Claims of Responsibility:** Credit for every major attack is claimed by at least one group, seeking to expand its profile and attract recruits and funds.
- **Dry Runs:** Dry runs are conducted to perfect the procedure; for example, the LTTE suicide bombers who assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had gained admittance to campaign rallies of political parties and had even managed to get front row seats at a rally attended by the then Prime Minister V.P. Singh posing as members of the press.
- **Signature Style:** The modus operandi of terrorist organizations also provides clues to law enforcement agencies since most major terrorist groups have a signature style. For example, Al Qaeda has focused on causing very large-scale civilian casualties in its strikes on Western symbols of political and economic influence as seen in the death tolls in the hits on the World Trade Center in New York and in the 1998 embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam. In the case of World Trade Center attack, the mode of delivery i.e. hijacked aircraft [xii], was highly effective in achieving the surprise element as well as in the resulting impact – in the first week following the attack, the US airline industry lost between \$1 to 2 billion [Goodrich, 2002]. While the use of aircraft has captured the world's attention since 9-11-2001, more commonly explosives have been used to cause fatalities. Chechen terrorists thrice posed as construction workers to stash explosives to be used later – in the sieges of a Moscow theatre in October 2002 and more recently of the school in Beslan and an artillery shell to assassinate the Chechen President Akhmad Kadryov in May 2004 [iii].

This identification of common factors sets the stage for the discussion of possible indicators of terrorist activity that we outline in our next section. Each of the factors

stated above has associated with it a certain set of activities that could serve as indicators of a possible attack.

### **A basic classification of indicators**

There are many angles to view terrorism from. We seek the simplest way of dissecting the pattern of a terrorist strike, which is to work backwards to identify common minimum requirements for an attack to succeed:

1. Availability of raw material (guns, explosives, chemicals),
2. Expertise in handling them,
3. Logistic support in the form of false identities, transportation, safe houses and sleeper agents and money for purchases or bribes.

However, rarely do all details of such preparation come to light prior to an attack. Yet evidence of even one of them must be investigated with a view to unearthing evidence of others to put together a composite picture of the threat. Viewed in this light, we can categorize possible indicators:

- A. **Red Flags (Almost Certain Indicators)** : These are clues that warrant immediate and exhaustive investigation because they point to a high likelihood of an attack.

(i) Unusual patterns of movement of a known explosive expert, as an example, B. Raman quotes the case of a Sri Lankan Tamil residing in Germany who visited Chennai often before Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Although the German police had warned Indian authorities of his local reputation as an explosive expert, adequate follow-up like requesting the German police to detain him for joint interrogation or investigation into the basis of his reputation was missing. Similarly the disappearance of explosive experts from law enforcement agencies, mining and controlled destruction companies and the military need to be investigated thoroughly whenever it comes to light [xi].

(ii) The reported sale of large quantities of chemicals to uncommon customers, Ramsi Yousef and Timothy McVeigh purchased chemicals (ammonium nitrate and fuel oil) directly from manufacturers to assemble the explosive devices for use in the 1993 WTC and in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombings. Further, the chemicals were delivered to self-storage units directly from the manufacturer in the case of Ramsi Yousef, which should have set off a warning to the law enforcement via the manufacturer [ii].

(iii) The reported theft of explosives like dynamite, fuses and blasting caps from mining or construction sites.

(iv) Tell-tale signs of failed explosive experiments. A chemical fire broke-out when Ramsi Yousef was building an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and bright stains and rusted metal were found in his apartment. Apartment rental agencies must periodically inspect apartments, particularly when the tenant has recently moved in.

Although this is not easy to accomplish, since most terrorists will not stay long in the target area, such inspections could be valuable. The perpetrators of the 11 March 2004 Madrid subway bombings killed themselves in an explosion in a rented apartment in the suburbs of Madrid after police surrounded them. Two backpacks of explosives, dynamite and detonators were found in the apartment and a car packed with explosives was parked nearby [BBC, April 4, 2004]. Neighbors told investigators that the suspects rented the apartment in the suburbs a month before the attacks, and were rarely seen in public and kept the window blinds drawn. Similarly, hospitals must be required to report the treatment of injuries resulting from explosions to law enforcement agencies [ii].

(v) Seizure of large quantities of explosives, on February 29, 2004, just over 10 days before the explosions on the subways of Madrid, police seized two vans, one of them containing 536 kilos of explosives and arrested two persons [CNN, February 29, 2004]. On 30 March 2004, more than 500 kg of ammonium nitrate, the chemical used in the Oklahoma City bombing and Bali bombings, was seized from a self-storage unit in London following a raid [BBC, March 30, 2004]. This sort of discovery should prompt the most stringent forms of surveillance and investigation.

**B. Probable Indicators:** These are warning signs that merit further investigation, particularly when more than one of them occurs simultaneously. The difficulty lies in identifying precisely what the messages mean and how they can be translated to actionable intelligence.

(i) Consistent appearance of reports of linkage between local insurgent and criminal groups and terrorist organizations are probable indicator. Foreign terrorist organizations depend upon the connections of local criminal gangs to ease the movement of men and material in a country. They may align themselves with gold and drug smugglers (to subvert Customs procedures), money launderers (to avail of large sums of local currency to make purchases) and insurgent groups (to exploit their ability to store and move large quantities of ammunition). For example, the Dawood Ibrahim gang was instrumental in bribing Customs officials to ignore the large scale smuggling of explosives along the Dighi coast of Maharashtra in January 1993, two months before the serial explosions. The law enforcement agencies generally depend on informers within the ranks of the criminal groups to alert them to such connections. Where that is not possible, the sudden and coordinated flight of criminals from the country can be a pointer to an impending attack. In the case of the 1993 serial blasts, police recognized the connection between the sudden and coordinated departure of the Memon family (an important lieutenant of Dawood Ibrahim) from Mumbai to Dubai between 10 and 12 March (the day of the blasts) and then on to a safe sanctuary in Karachi on March 20 [vii].

(ii) The appearance of literature, video-tapes, electronic communications, or material on web sites of terrorist organizations, predicting a major event is another indicator. For example, on June

25, 2001, an Arabic news channel reported that Al Qaeda leaders were predicting that the U.S. and Israel "will witness important surprises" and had released a recruitment and fund-raising video-tape on the heels of a summer of hectic inter-cell activity [iv]. Also, soon after the downing of two Russian airplanes on 25 August 2004 and suicide bombings in Moscow on 1 September, there were reports [New Zealand Herald, September 1, 2004] attributed to the Islambouli Brigade, an affiliate of Osama bin Ladin's IIF, of further attacks against Russia. These announcements seemed to presage the tragedy at Beslan on September 3rd.

(iii) The split of a well-established terrorist organization into two factions or the creation of a new terrorist entity from the dregs of many old ones is also the sign of impending terror. On February 23, 1998, Osama bin Ladin issued a fatwa for attacks on all Americans, including civilians and for the creation of an International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders. On May 28, he formally announced the formation of this entity [v]. This was soon followed by the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Africa on August 7, 1998 that left 258 dead and 5000 injured. The point to note is that the constituent groups of the IIF including the Egyptian Jihad, Jaama Islamiya, the Harkat ul Ansar and Al- Mujahiroun had all been co-operating with each other since 1990, but the formal announcement of the new entity was followed by a demonstration of its potency.

(iv) The transfer of large sums of money using unusual methods and between parties not known to have large business deals. Mohammed Atta received \$100,000 in a single transaction between his U.S. bank account and a source in the UAE and subsequent transfers added up to \$500,000 [Washington Post, September 7, 2001]. Since Atta did not have a business front set up, such large transfers should have evoked suspicion. Similarly Ramzi bin al-Shibh, who was denied a visa to the U.S. four times in 2000 because he was expected to be untraceable once he arrived here, transferred money in installments of around \$10,000 each from Germany to Zacharias Moussaoui and Marwan al-Shehi [Associated Press, June 6, 2002]. Operation Green Quest, a task force instituted by the U.S. Treasury Department in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack, lists 12 suspicious activities including transaction inconsistent with past activity, high volume transactions through countries known to be sympathetic to terrorists, unexplained clearing of third party cheques, transfers between bank accounts of related entities or charities for no apparent reason, lack of apparent fund raising activity (i.e. small donations) in charities' accounts, issuing cheques numbered sequentially to the same person or business and deposit in one country coinciding with withdrawal in another country of concern or vice-versa [x]. In the Indian context, a sudden spurt in incidences of extortion of businessmen or in hawala transactions may point to the method of moving money.

- C. **Possible Indicators:** Under this category are those signs that may or may not mean a terrorist attack is in the offing. However, since a single lapse may prove to be fatal, law enforcement agencies must still attempt to enlarge the scope of investigation to check for other telltale signs of terrorism.

- (i) The sudden spurt or decline in communications between known high-ranking terrorist leaders.
- (ii) Increase in incidences of bribes being offered to Law Enforcement, Customs and Immigration officials.
- (iii) Large-scale theft of passports and the appearance of those numbers elsewhere. Usually, thefts of passports are relatively common and are used more for illegal traffic of workers, but the possibility of it being used for terrorist infiltration also exists.
- (iv) Appearance of strange publicity material on the Internet that appeals to a specific community or people. This could indicate the beginning of a recruitment drive in the target zone. Of special interest should be the sudden appearance of suicide bomber tapes and eulogies on websites.
- (v) Appearance of unusual financial activity among groups trading in the futures markets or news reports of unusual activity in general. In the case of Sept 11, there was similar such activity in United and American Airlines (the airlines owning the aircraft used in the attacks) shares. The scheme was to buy many 'put' options (i.e. options which gave the owner the right to sell shares at well below current prices) perhaps with the knowledge that the stock prices would plummet so sharply in the near future that the options would multiply and so even selling at below current prices would be profitable. Such purchase of options was done not only in the United and American Airline shares, but also in shares of Morgan Stanley Dean Witter and Merrill Lynch, who had significant presence in the WTC towers [ix].
- (vi) Appearance of wild theories and unusual reports in the lay press. For example In the case of Mumbai 1993, there were reports appearing in the Indian Express, which spoke of large-scale landings of explosives on the Konkan coast. At the time these were dismissed as being hype aimed at increasing circulation.

## **Conclusion**

We have listed some of the vulnerabilities of the society that terrorists choose to target. Our list is by no means complete; it is however a promising start to a line of debate that could potentially open up new avenues to detecting the onset of terrorist acts. Taken to its logical conclusion, this kind of work could at the very least provide a higher level of general awareness about terrorism and perhaps even contribute in building actionable intelligence estimates.

The author seeks to caution readers that ultimately terrorists modify their attack strategy according to the choice of target. So it is very important to keep a society's vulnerabilities in mind when drawing up indicators for a likely terrorist strike. For example, terrorist attacks seek to incite communal passions in a society like India by attacking places of worship and religious processions, the riots that are provoked by this act, serve as a force multiplier for the terrorists in their fight against an open

society. Similarly for a global organization like the Al Qaeda, economic targets like oil tankers, harbors, transportation nodes and electronic commercial transactions are attractive for the damage that it will do to the global economy. Keeping sight of things like this should provide a useful tool in divining meaningful indicators.

Ultimately to combat terrorism eternal vigilance, timely sharing of intelligence and prompt follow-through action are essential. However supporting strategies that involve identifying terrorism indicators, followed by a global effort to deny safe havens to terrorists and their supporters will also aid considerably in mitigating the threat.

## References and Footnotes

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- [ix] N.M. Ahmed (2002a), 'The War on Freedom', Tree of Life Publications, CA, p. 118.
- [x] U.S. Customs Service (2002), 'Green Quest', Customs Publication No. 0000-0171, Office of Investigations, Washington D.C.
- [xi] BRF Thread If this link is broken please contact editorial team.
- [xii] Note 1: It must be noted however that the use of civilian aircraft to inflict casualties was not entirely novel. Three attempts to do so occurred in 1994, with one Air France flight from Algiers being hijacked by the Armed Islamic Group with the intention of crashing it into the Eiffel Tower, which however was thwarted by the storming of the plane on the ground [viii]. Ahmad also lists various sources to prove that American intelligence agencies were aware, at least since 1995, of Project Bojinka, a plan discovered from the computer of Abdul Murad, a named co-conspirator with Ramzi Yousef in the plan to assassinate Pope John Paul II in Manila and in the attack on the WTC towers in 1993. Project Bojinka called for the hijack and either destruction of 11 civilian airlines over the Pacific or alternatively for the planes to be crashed into major skyscrapers in the U.S.