

The Path to a
COUNTERTERRORISM DOCTRINE



MIPT Memorial Institute for the
Prevention of Terrorism

Countering Terrorism with Knowledge

By David Cid
MIPT Deputy Director

PROLOGUE TO FAILURE

On February 26, 1993, Islamic terrorists detonated a truck bomb in the basement garage of Tower One of the World Trade Center. Within days, master bomber Ramzi Yusuf was hunted as a fugitive and three co-conspirators were identified and arrested. This prompt and definitive resolution of a stunning act of terrorism on United States soil seemed to demonstrate that existing authorities and procedures were sufficient to address the “terrorism problem.” But our understanding of the terrorism threat was flawed, and the lessons we took from the attack and subsequent investigation were flawed as well.

The investigative acumen of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is well established, and when it focuses attention and resources on a specific problem, the results are uniformly good. In the investigation that would become known as “World Trade Center One,” a preexisting body of intelligence about the attackers, an informant on the periphery of the conspiracy and serendipity all played a role. The ATF located the axel the day of the blast, leading authorities to the rental facility. The FBI arrested Mohammed Salameh when he returned to reclaim a \$400 deposit on the van used to transport the bomb, an astoundingly stupid act.

With Salameh in custody, a trail of intelligence and evidence led to the identification of Ramzi Yousef and others. Overlaying these events was information from an FBI informant who had been reporting on Omar Abdul Rahman, the spiritual leader of the group, and the results of a limited but ultimately useful investigation of these same extremists. The arrest and convictions of the attackers reinforced the view that the criminal justice system was adequate to handle the terrorism problem.

But there were important unanswered questions. Why did we not prevent this attack? Although prevention of the next attack was clearly a concern, law enforcement and the national security apparatus made changes to existing policy and procedure only on the margins. The other more important question, could we prevent future attacks, was answered decisively on April 19, 1995, in Oklahoma City when a similar explosive device left 168 dead and hundreds injured. Within 90 minutes of the

explosion, right wing extremist Timothy McVeigh was arrested traveling north out of Oklahoma City when Highway Patrol Officer Charlie Hanger stopped him for driving his yellow 1977 Mercury Marquis without a license plate. Hanger noticed McVeigh was carrying a concealed weapon and effected the arrest. Later that day, McVeigh was linked to the bombing through the vehicle identification number of an axle and the remnants of a license plate from the destroyed Ryder truck. Again, law enforcement performed admirably, and ultimately the core conspirators were brought to justice. But still the larger questions remained unanswered and, for the most part, unexamined in a deep and thoughtful way.

The Islamist terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center and right wing extremist McVeigh were worlds apart. Their motivations, beliefs and goals could not have been more disparate. These differences and the intervening two years between attacks made it difficult to see important commonalities between these events. Both had the potential to provide insights into future terrorist operations in the U.S. The failure to prevent these attacks also argued for reinventing domestic counterterrorism, making it truly responsive to emerging threats.

In both attacks, large, vehicle borne improvised explosive devices were employed. These devices were made using easily acquired materials, the technical hurdles in constructing them were low, operations were carried out by a small cadre of determined extremists, and planning and execution were undetected by authorities. Despite the failure of existing law, policy and procedure to prevent two major acts of terrorism in two years, the conventional wisdom was that counterterrorism in the U.S. was working and needed no major reform.

Islamist militancy continued its inevitable spiral of ferocity toward 9/11, with the attacks in Kenya and Tanzania as prelude, but law enforcement focused its attention on Oklahoma City. Congress, viewing militias and other expressions of militancy as a continuing threat, increased FBI resources specifically to address this. However, an examination of the empirical data would have demonstrated the threat from the right was diminishing.

McVeigh viewed his actions as the first in a bombing campaign by true patriots against an overreaching government. But, in reality, the carnage of Murrah so horrified many on the extreme right that they tempered their violent rhetoric and marginalized the more militant members of their cadre. Despite this reaction, government resources at all levels remained focused on the domestic right while militant Islam grew in strength, audacity and operational sophistication.

ASSUMPTION AND VIVIDNESS

The failure to anticipate and prevent both Oklahoma City and 9/11 has been attributed in large measure to a failure of analysis. The information was there, we simply failed to connect the dots. The real failure, however, was of self analysis. The counterterrorism community was caught in two common analytic pitfalls; assumption and vividness.

Vividness is the tendency to give more weight to personal experience than empirical data. For example, if one has repeated delays at LaGuardia airport, he may advise friends to avoid flying there, but an examination of the historical record may indicate LaGuardia has as good or better record of on-time flights as many comparable airports. The vividness of these attacks and the legitimate concern that others might follow focused most of our attention on what was only one dimension, first militant Islam and then the radical right, of a much broader threat spectrum. Although it was prudent and necessary to investigate and collect intelligence aggressively upon likely sources of threats after both events, vividness blinded us to other emerging or evolving threats.

The assumptions after World Trade Center One: the next attack would be against another highly symbolic target; therefore, it would be in a major city; it would involve affiliates of the radical Islamicists and; as we were alert for a similar conspiracy, we would not miss it. These were proven wrong on April 19, 1995.

The assumptions after Oklahoma City: the next attack would be by the radical right; a government building would be the next target and; as we were alert for a salient from the right, we would not miss it. These were proven wrong on September 11, 2001.

Crime prevention was, and is, a part of the doctrine that underpins the day to day activities of police departments at all levels of state and local government. Crime prevention supports the mandate of these agencies to maintain the public safety and public order. The lead counterterrorism agency in the U.S., the FBI, has no broad public safety mandate, nor was the culture of crime prevention an integral part of its institutional life.

This is not to say that federal law enforcement agencies do not prevent crime, but rather the prevention of crime is not a central, animating theme. They are, by necessity, case centric and devote their energy to proving the elements of a crime. Further, the task of preparing for court, where the standard of proof is high and attention to detail is critical for facing an adversarial defense, is quite different from being intelligence driven, where the standard is whether one can act upon it, not proof. The same is true of other federal agencies with counterterrorism responsibilities. It would only be in response to 9/11 that prevention of terrorism would become the principal goal above all others, even prosecution.

The Next Worst Thing

Since 9/11, there have been no major acts of terrorism in the U.S. This is a remarkable accomplishment. The radical Islamic adversary remains committed and driven by hate and religious fanaticism and therefore remains a threat. The radical right, long quiescent, is re-activated around immigration and eminent domain. Environmental and animal rights extremists who have for years rejected taking lives are now speaking in terms of killing people to get attention.

The question that keeps public safety professionals awake is this: what will be the next worst thing? We observe and study attempted attacks and develop countermeasures, such as limiting the quantity of fluids in carry-on luggage, but the adversary is watching too. One thing is certain, without reliable intelligence and the courage to follow the empirical data wherever it may take us, we will not anticipate emerging threats, we will be surprised again and people will die.

DEVELOPING A DOMESTIC COUNTERTERRORISM DOCTRINE

Unifying intelligence capabilities must be our first task. Our democracy offers the terrorist a hospitable operational environment, where he enjoys the same constitutional protections as the Boy Scouts. Despite its limitations, actionable intelligence is the key to preventing attacks from any quarter. The terrorist, like water, will take the path of least resistance. The list of unprotected or poorly protected targets, such as schools, houses of worship, shopping malls and hospitals, is nearly endless, and we have learned the limitations of increasing security in response to “chatter.” Where will the terrorist attack? Wherever we are vulnerable and inattentive. And because we are limited in our capacity to mitigate vulnerabilities, we must be attentive and alert, employing all the intelligence tools at our disposal.

With intelligence as the bedrock of our counterterrorism effort and with a willingness to follow the empirical data wherever it takes us, we can develop and deploy countermeasures responsive to more clearly defined threats. This will bring economies and efficiencies to the process, but more importantly, it will enhance the safety and security of the nation.

The argument that hyper intelligence is a threat to civil liberty is wrong. In reality, the more powerful and precise our intelligence, the less important indiscriminant data collection becomes and the less likely we will investigate, arrest and detain the innocent.

Proactively addressing emerging threats, the next component of this doctrine, is possible with precise intelligence enhanced by thoughtful speculation. Prior to 9/11, we recognized that aircraft could be used as weapons, but the notion contradicted accepted views on air piracy, so it was rejected as improbable. Now, consider the potential outcome of 9/11 had we taken measures such as reinforcing and locking cockpit doors, a simple but elegant solution to suicidal hijackers. Good intelligence prepares us for surprise and identifies horizon issues. It allows us to be anticipatory, and underpins our use of imagination with empirical data. This keeps us grounded in reality, and enhances the likelihood that the

private sector and the American people will support additional security with the inevitable impact it has on our civil life.

Incorporating counterterrorism with conventional policing will make the 750,000 uniformed officers a part of the counterterrorism cadre. Police already possess the skills needed to be effective in terrorism prevention. The capacity to recognize indicators of criminal activity, the ability to interact with the people they serve in a productive way, the engagement of members of the community as informants or cooperating individuals, all are critical in identifying terrorism warnings and indicators. The terrorist is constrained by the same laws of physics we all are. In order to commit an act of terrorism he must engage in certain preparatory actions such as acquisition of materials, target surveillance, recruitment of talent, and so on. These preparatory behaviors, if identified, present our best opportunity to disrupt the planning cycle and prevent an attack. Looking at the world through the lens of a counterterrorism practitioner, the police officer becomes a force multiplier for the FBI, which is highly competent, but heavily burdened.

Using small, responsive, multidisciplinary, intelligence driven teams to investigate terrorism employs a model that neutralizes the advantages of the adversary, who is flexible and innovative. The model for this is the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force, and it is working well. But this model should be adopted by major City departments. To defeat such an enemy, we must become him.

Integrating these four pillars of terrorism prevention through seamless coordination between federal, state and local authorities, will place us on the path to a counterterrorism doctrine, and will save lives.

The further we move from 9/11, the greater the likelihood of another major act of terrorism, since our adversary has had seven years to adjust to our enhanced security environment and work around our countermeasures. He also remains fascinated by the notion of killing us in large numbers. The enhanced security, intelligence and investigative tools available since 9/11 created a hostile operational environment for the terrorist, but the American people have reached their tolerance for such measures. Still the terrorist is not static, nor can we be.

David Cid, Deputy Director



David Cid is Deputy Director of the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism in Oklahoma City, a non-profit knowledge management and terrorism research institute. Prior to joining the MIPT in 2006, Mr. Cid was President of Salus International, a consulting practice providing Security, Crisis Management, and Business Continuity services. Clients included the United States Army, the FBI, the Department of State, and Fortune 500 companies. For 2 years he was an advisor to foreign governments on counterterrorism in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Mr. Cid is a 20 year veteran of the FBI, where he served as a counterterrorism specialist. He was a member of the FBI International Crisis Response Team and while assigned to the New York field office, a member of the FBI Special Weapons and Tactics team.

Mr. Cid has been on-scene commander in extortions, kidnappings, and acts of terrorism and has led special events security planning for the World Series, the Special Olympics, and the U.S. Open. In 1996, he supervised the first successful investigation and prosecution under the Biological Weapons Antiterrorism Act, interdicting a plot to assassinate federal and local officials.

A native of New York, Mr. Cid joined the FBI in 1981, retiring as an Inspector and Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the Oklahoma City Field Office.

© 2008 by the Memorial Institute for the
Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT),
621 N. Robinson, 4th Floor, Oklahoma City, OK 73102
(405) 278-6300
www.mipt.org

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without permission in writing from:

MIPT, 621 N. Robinson, 4th Floor, Oklahoma City, OK 73102.

The Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) is a terrorism prevention training center for police officers, investigators, intelligence analysts and first responders offering the largest open source collection of documents on counterterrorism.

For more on MIPT, please visit www.mipt.org.

Points of view in this book are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of MIPT or the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Supported under Award Number 2008-TF-T8-K001.



MIPT

621 North Robinson Avenue, 4th Floor
Oklahoma City, OK 73102
405.278.6300
MIPT.org

MIPT publications are available at www.mipt.org