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Car Bombs.Com Internet-Enabled Terrorism and Homegrown Jihadists

*Rebecca Givner-Forbes**

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THE TWO car bombs discovered in London and the third used to attack an airport terminal in Glasgow on 29 and 30 June serve as a reminder that even amateur terrorists can potentially cause death and disruption. Descriptions of these bombs focus on their potential deadliness as well as their amateurish construction. Such descriptions illustrate why so many terrorist organizations have been able to use car bombs: they can be both technologically uncomplicated and effective at the same time.

The age of Internet-enabled terror has seen car bombs become even more widely accessible. Instructions and assistance in building simple explosive devices are available not just to establish terrorist organizations, but to self-starting individuals and small groups spurred to act in the name of Jihad. Such “entrepreneurial terrorists” are served by a vibrant and dynamic web presence where extremists can meet in virtual space to discuss hypothetical attacks. Arabic-language, password-protected forums are the primary web mediums for the exchange of information – gained either through Internet research or real world experience – in constructing and deploying the tools of terrorism. The result is the increasing decentralization and the widening distribution of terrorists’ technical and tactical know-how.

Car Bombs.Com

In the past, such information has been confined to the institutional knowledge of established terrorist organizations and the personal expertise of key individuals. But the availability of new online resources and the transformation of Jihadism into a global movement means that future terrorist attacks will increasingly come from amateurs and entrepreneurs who are animated by Jihadist ideology but who lack membership in pre-existing terrorist organizations.

It is yet unknown what role online manuals and instruction may have played in the UK plots. The amateurish nature of the car bombs suggests that the participants did not have access to the expertise and professionalism of established terrorist organizations. Also, those behind the London bombs appear to have had a presence in Jihadist forums, allegedly posting a message heralding an attack in London the day before the bombs were discovered.

Car bombs have featured prominently on Jihadist websites. Instructional materials detailing the preparation and positioning of car bombs are widely popular and in frequent circulation. For example, the Encyclopaedia of Afghan Jihad, available online, includes formulas for calculating the amount of explosives a vehicle must deliver to destroy different types of buildings. Another document available on Jihadist forums, a guide to positioning car bombs, instructs would-be terrorists to park outside cinemas or sport stadiums in order to detonate among throngs departing the venue. A third document,

a PowerPoint presentation, contains basic designs of car bombs and other improvised explosive devices allegedly used in Iraq.

One of the most recent and detailed manuals on car bombs was published on Jihadist forums this April. The manual includes a number of insights and considerations pertinent to the planning and executing of a car bomb or truck bomb attack. It contains “lessons learned” from previous vehicle-borne bomb attacks, focusing on the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the 1996 bombing of US military barracks in al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia. It discusses the use of different homemade explosives in car bombs. It highlights the value of attacking buildings with lots of glass to create deadly shrapnel out of the flying shards during an explosion.

The manual also focuses on the damage wrought at various distances and blast forces. “Certain death comes with a blast of 100 to 120 pounds per square inch,” it reads. Charts are included to illustrate the positioning and types of bombs needed to ensure the deadliness of the bomb.

Live Help Available Online

Car bombs also figure in the discussion of members of Jihadist forums. In April, ICPVTR observed a lengthy discussion in which several participants of a password-protected Arabic-language forum met online to pool their knowledge on car bombs and discuss the relative merits of various explosives and detonators. According to one member, their goal was to compile a set of car bombing instructions “from A to Z, from the steering wheel to the gas tank”.

During the car bomb discussion, several members of the forum readily offered their insights and experiences. They swapped knowledge on detonators and mechanisms of detonation. They discussed making explosives using homemade substances, including mixtures of acetylene or butane gases and oxygen, as well as ammonium nitrate mixtures like ANFO and ammonal. One participant recommended stocking a car with large gas canisters, just like those used in both the London and Glasgow car bombs.

The discussion demonstrated one of the most important features of the online Jihadist presence: its interactive component, facilitated by the use of web mediums – primarily forums – which allow any member to post materials and participate in discussions. Not only can amateurs download instructions, they can access other members of virtual Jihadist community to obtain additional knowledge and advice.

The Process of Entrepreneurial Terrorism

Online manuals and tactical discussion forums do not exist for the benefit of established terrorist organizations like al Qaeda. Rather, they are designed to incite and inform entrepreneurial terrorists interested in taking up the cause of Jihad on their own initiative.

For many of these aspiring terrorists, the online Jihadist presence provides the sole portal into the world of radical ideology. Traditional contact points have become less accessible due to post 9-11 security efforts, which have put travel to terrorist training camps and access to terrorist organizations out of the reach of many. In such an environment, the Internet has emerged as the primary mechanism of the Jihad movement’s expansion.

The Jihadist virtual community helps cement ideological commitment among terrorist sympathizers who come to the Internet in search of radical ideas. Its members are fed interpretations of religion and politics designed to create myths of victimization and oppression, which are then used to justify violence. When the process of indoctrination is complete, individuals are encouraged to recruit, train, and equip a small terrorist cell, relying in part on Jihadist forums for instructions and assistance.

It is a process in development. To date, there have been few instances of entrepreneurial terrorism, in spite of the volume of materials on Jihadist forums and the many fervent calls for violence among their membership. This could be due to a number of factors, including inconsistency in the accuracy and sophistication of available manuals. However, they are slowly improving, and incitement to attack remains constant.

The post-attack investigation of the UK car bombs has not yet revealed whether the terrorists made use of this shadowy virtual resource in planning their botched attacks. However, these incidents show us what an Internet-enabled entrepreneurial terrorist attack would probably look like: amateurish and simple, but nevertheless disruptive and potentially dangerous.

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