

THE ROLE OF TACTICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL SOLUTIONS IN CHOOSING TERRORIST TARGETS

Attila HORVATH

National University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract: *After the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 the U.S. Department of Justice started to publish extracts from the „Terrorist Training Manual” on 7 December 2001. Afterwards miscellaneous independent sources and government agencies published the whole manual. The aim of the Author is to demonstrate how terrorist attacks were committed, and how the terrorist forces choose of those targets and arranged timing and how they used open-source intelligence for these purposes.*

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1. THE ROLE OF RECONNAISSANCE AND INTELLIGENCE¹

When planning their actions, terrorist groups consider the characteristics of the goal, the location, the time, the timing, the chosen device and the method. Intelligence is a decisive factor as early as in the first phase of planning a terrorist attack. For example, when planning an attack against a traffic network, it seems to be relatively easy to gather basic information on the targeted network, terminal or vehicle. Nowadays one of the most common forms of intelligence processes is the gathering of so-called Open Source Intelligence.²

In the era of the ICT revolution one might believe that the first step of planning consists of nothing else but taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the world wide web.

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2 The highest advantage of the open source intelligence may be considered, in the same time, as a disadvantage. The enormous amount of accessible open source data makes difficult to select the relevant information from the “noise”. It is even more difficult to filter out those information that is created and disseminated for misinformation purposes.

The next step is filling out the gaps in the information retrieved from the Internet using information sources that prove to be useful even in our time, such as public libraries, maps, passenger information devices, timetables, notices, advertisements etc.

Very few sectors remain on which the basic information required for the planning of a terrorist attack cannot be retrieved by anyone.

Although most countries can be explored in 360 degrees and in high-resolution 3D pictures using applications such as Google Street View, it remains very important to visit the chosen location and to thoroughly inspect the access roads and escape routes, even several times.

The series of terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 could not have been executed without inspecting the targets several times.

Subsequent investigations have revealed that most of the perpetrators have had previously taken reconnaissance flights to the relevant destinations. (Chailand, Arnaud, eds 2007. 329.) CCTV camera records prove that the suicide bombers committed the attack against the London public transport network on 5 July 2005 have previously visited all of their chosen targets. (Horváth 2010. 59-69.) For the planning and execution purposes of a terrorist attack, the leaders and perpetrators need sufficient knowledge from the security system.

It looks like an easy task to find web sites providing such information for terrorist groups, however it is far more complicated to find reliable and current sources even for security specialists and secret services. (Horváth 2010. 59-69.)

I have conducted an instinctive empirical study on retrievable information from the Internet. On the 7 July 2005, right after the news appeared on the terrorist attacks against the London public transport network, I asked four of my university students to help me in compiling a quick survey from the information available in the Internet.

I asked them to collect information on the public transport networks of London, Paris, Moscow and New York. The results were shocking.

The gathered data were charts, maps and photos from the subway systems of all four metropolises. We are sure that such information in wrong hands would facilitate planning of terrorist attacks. We obtained traffic pattern information of certain lines, location and accessibility to the stations, the distance between the stations etc.

The world wide web contains several publicly available descriptions on traffic systems might also prove useful for the attackers.

It is an interesting question whether it is possible to define precisely what kind of information is required for terrorist groups for attack planning?

What planning methodology do they use for instance, to elaborate their plans, to select the perpetrators, to decide in the methods, the location, timing, etc?

However, primary information or studies summing up this topic are not available for the public. There are just very few exceptions.

The assumed existence of the training manual of Al-Qaeda became proven. After the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 the U.S. Department of Justice published extracts from the „Terrorist Training Manual” on 7 December 2001.

Soon after miscellaneous independent sources and government agencies published the whole manual.

The manual divides terrorist attacks into the following three phases:

- research & reconnaissance;
- planning and
- execution. (Terrorist Training Manual, 2000. 87.)

Preparations obviously start with the designation of the target group of persons, the targets and the specific or expected goals of the terrorist attack.

After that the intelligence gathering phase is started. The manual demands such an inspection when the target is an object. In such cases, an on-scene assessment (field study) is needed from the surrounding area and the interiors of the building (object, base), illustrated by several photos taken where possible.

Substantive aspects of the inspection of the surrounding area could be:

- How wide the surrounding streets are and where do they lead to?
- How can the location be accessed by pedestrians and/or by vehicles?
- Physical characteristics of the given area.
- Traffic lights and pavements.
- Is there a law enforcement organization or a government agency located nearby?
- Is there an embassy or a consulate nearby?
- Economic characteristics of the area.
- Expected time frame of possible traffic congestion.
- Functional characteristics of the area e.g. Industrial, residential or rural area, trees and bushes etc. (Terrorist Training Manual, 2000. 87.)
- Substantive aspects of the inspection of the interior of the buildings (objects, bases) are:
- Expected number of people inside.
- Number of sentinel posts and guards.
- Number and name of the managers of the given organization.
- Location of the phone switchboard.
- When do people arrive at and leave the object? (their routine)

- Location of internal parking spaces.
- Electric supply network and switches.
- Number of buildings, floors and rooms. (Terrorist Training Manual, 2000. 86-87.)

The background information is vital for the success of terrorist attacks.

Terrorist groups may apply multiple methods in order to obtain these data.

Even the leaders of a research focusing on the terror threat posed to the traffic networks of the United States that highlighted several potential vulnerable points, were shocked when they realized how easy it was to get key information from the employees of airports, transport companies or public authorities. (Landree, Paul etc. 2007. 27–31.)

However, insider information is usually more valuable than the irresponsible information leakage of the employees. There are several ways to obtain it. Active members of the terrorist groups or even individuals from their sleeper agent networks can infiltrate into the target organization.

Information may be obtained from employees by different means such as scam, extortion or even by cyber attack. Information gathered from human resources may help to fill in information gaps remained after the analysis of open source information and field studies.

Turning back to al-Qaeda's training manual and the common aspects of decision-making process mentioned there³ the group leaders (or planners) have to draw up the operation plan based on the results of reconnaissance, considering the following aspects:

- Types of required weapons.
- Number of people required for the execution of the plan and their training.
- An alternative of the original plan.
- Tactical classification of the operation. (silent or loud elimination operation)
- Specificity of the timing of the attack.

³ This does not mean that terrorist groups use the same methodology for attack planning purposes. Significant differences may be found between groups, for example in the decision-making competencies or the execution of reconnaissance tasks. The term "common" simply reflects here to unavoidable aspects.

- The target of the operation. Is it one individual or many?
- Meeting point for the attackers before execution.
- Meeting point of the attackers after execution.
- Safe withdrawal, escape routes after execution.
- Foreseen difficulties with the execution that the team may encounter. (Terrorist Training Manual, 2000. 87-88.)

2. PLANNING AND TIMING OF TERRORIST ATTACKS

After processing and detailed evaluation of the reconnaissance information the planning and organization phases of terrorist attacks is started, where the above mentioned aspects have to be considered. The preparation phase of the series of terrorist attacks of 9/11 took at least 2 years and al-Qaeda paid attention to every single minor detail. (Rabasa, Chalk et al. 2006/a 37.) We are certain that the preparation, organization and execution phases were not rigidly separated from each other, but rather were conducted concurrently in accordance with the agreed objective and the information available at their disposal.

A detailed description of target selection criteria may be found in the chapter on the characteristics of terror threat of the RAND Corporation's monograph titled Exploring Terrorist Targeting Preferences. It is clear that unavoidable issues regarding goals and circumstances must be answered in the first phase of planning terrorist attacks. Decisions should be made on what kind of damage to be caused, on the estimated number of casualties that attack will probably result, and this should be aligned with the logistic possibilities, the efficiency of the chosen perpetrators as well as the security and other aspects of the selected target. (Libicki, Chalk, etc. 2007. 20-51.) Significant differences may be pointed out in the decision-making scheme of the various terrorist groups.

The al-Qaeda terrorist network pays attention to, and accepts the leadership model of its allies.

The central leadership, called “the core” accepts the proposals of its member organizations (operating on a franchise basis) with regard to the goal and the location and is not further involved in the elaboration of certain details of the attack.

It means that the allied organization enjoys a high degree of autonomy. (Rabasa, Chalk etc. 2006/a 63-68.)

The decision-making process is also affected by the internal organizational attributes of the group and the psychological characteristics of its members.

These are probably even harder to define than the psychological and sociological characteristics of terrorism.

Nevertheless, we cannot neglect the evaluation of the psychological background of the decision-making scheme of terrorist attacks since it helps us to understand the attitude of the leaders towards the risks pertaining to their decisions. (McCormick, 2003. 473–507)

Regarding the decision-making process from this point of view the priority is not the safety of the members of the terrorist group, but rather the successful execution of the attack.

According to Bruce Hoffman, the key to the success of the attacks and the survivability of the organization lies not only on the qualifications and technical competencies, but also depends on the intelligence of the leaders.

To support his theory, he mentions how accurately had Osama bin Laden planned the suicide attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. (Hoffman, 2006)

The term intelligence in this sense refers mostly to the organizational and systematic skills of the leaders and the planners.

It means they should be able to identify the vulnerability of the selected target, to find the risks and to harmonize the projected goal with the location of the attack, the security environment and other circumstances.

Timing is also a key issue concerning the planning and organization of terrorist attacks.

Having appropriate timing, the political, social and economic effects of a terrorist attack may be multiplied.

There are two major attributes of timing: choosing the time of the day for the attack, and choosing the exact time of execution.

The time of the day for the attack has a symbolic meaning as well.

Timing has additional meaning, because it reflects on other events that a terrorist group might take as a reference, whether they want to react on events supporting their ideology or affecting their operation.

In this regard terrorist groups may consider the following aspects by timing:

- public, religious or community holidays and celebrations;
- election campaigns;
- community, political, cultural and sports events;
- anniversaries;
- reaction to measures taken against the terrorist group, such as the death or arrest of its leaders and members;
- diplomatic events, summits, visits of heads of state or government leaders.

From the above list I would like to elaborate details from the effects of terrorist attacks during election campaigns.

Two relevant examples have to be mentioned here: the series of terrorist attacks committed by PIRA in London in 1992 and the suicide bombings in Madrid on 11 March 2004.

The period of election campaigns have high sensitivity in the democratic countries from a political point of view.

There are several examples of terrorist groups intensifying their activities before the elections.

During the general election campaign period in the beginning of 1992, more than 15 bombings were committed by PIRA in the City, the financial central of London.

The aim of these terrorist attacks was to make political discourse revolve around the Northern Irish question. (Coaffee, 2009. 100)

There is certainly no coincidence either that the series of terrorist attacks in Madrid on 11 March 2004 were committed during the last phase of the parliamentary election campaign.

The repercussions of this one were far more serious than the several-month-long series of PIRA bombings.

Rather than focusing on the anniversary, the timing reflected the importance of the aforementioned parliamentary election campaign.

The attacks were executed on a Thursday, only a few days before the parliamentary elections scheduled for Sunday 14 March. José María Aznar, prime minister since 1996 was aiming to win the elections and to form a government for the third time.

Political analysts said he had high chance to succeed his aim and this was also supported by the poll results.

Yet the election was won by the Spanish Socialist Workers Party led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

The fact that after the terrorist attack the socialist prime minister candidate promised to withdraw the Spanish soldiers stationing in Iraq with immediate effect played an evident role in his victory.

The promise of the socialist politician also indicated that he did not wish to follow the most important political direction of Aznar, i.e. supporting the anti-terrorism war of the United States unconditionally. (Moreno, 2004. 10.)

There is no empirical evidence or conclusion drawn from other surveys supporting the theory that the series of terrorist attacks had a decisive influence on the outcome.

It is not possible to repeat a parliamentary election under different circumstances.

It is also a fact that if the internal affairs of a country are defined by the competition between the two main political sides, a terrorist attack during the last phase of the election campaign may have a strong influence on the outcome. (Moreno, 2004. 100.)

The exact time of the attack within the chosen period may depend on several factors.

If the main target is a person, the wisest course of action is to attack where security is the weakest, such as on the way from home to work or at a public event etc.

If the target is an institution, a community or an infrastructure system, the timing depends on the type of the target, the opening hours and other business and service aspects.

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