

International hotels attract tourists, local elite, terrorists

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LONDON - Consider how a city looks to a terrorist seeking targets.

There's the airport - inviting, but heavily secured. There's the U.S. Embassy, perimeter guarded by crack local forces and Marines. And there's the plush international hotel, open to anyone with a decent outfit and money for a cup of coffee.

Across the world, the finest hotels draw foreign businessmen, droves of tourists, and local movers and shakers who crowd the restaurants and bars to see and be seen. There are society weddings, banquets and even "Sweet Sixteen" birthday parties for the daughters of the well-to-do.

In places where Western-style amenities are rare, international hotels are often the most vital connection to the rest of the world. Their business model demands openness and accessibility for visitors and guests, making total security virtually impossible despite security barriers, metal detectors and high-tech surveillance gear.

That's why, experts say, hotels have been attacked by terrorists in Pakistan, Jordan, Afghanistan and now Mumbai, India, where commandos battled terrorists for three days in a deadly rampage focused on the renowned Taj Mahal and Oberoi hotels.

"There is obviously a trend for hotels to be targets," said Christopher Newberry, general manager of the Serena Hotel in Kabul, Afghanistan, where three militants slaughtered eight guests in January.

The Marriott in Islamabad, Pakistan, is being rebuilt with a 16-foot high security wall to protect against bomb blasts after a massive truck bomb explosion in September that killed 54 people and wounded more than 250. A series of Pakistani hotels have been targeted in attacks dating back to 2002, when 14 people were killed by militants targeting the Sheraton in Karachi.

Security has been tightened around hotels in Islamabad, with direct access to hotels blocked by heavy concrete barriers. Motorists have to drive past surveillance cameras and over a bomb detector to get in, and paramilitary troops are deployed at kiosks built of sand bags.

"The threat against diplomatic targets persists, but due to target hardening, the terrorists seek to attack international hotels," terrorism analyst Rohan Gunaratna said in a report on the bombing of the Islamabad Marriott. "As Westerners frequent such hotels, they should be considered second embassies."

In many parts of the world, the best hotels are used as a personal playground by the city's elite. The public relations value of attacking a symbol of national pride like the Taj Mahal makes it even more attractive to terrorists. And the sheer size of major hotels, with hundreds of rooms, dozens of hallways and many hiding places, makes them tough to defend.

The social scene of a big-city hotel lured jihadists in Jordan in 2005 when suicide bombers killed 60 people in three coordinated attacks that targeted, among other things, a wedding party with 300 guests at the Radisson hotel in Amman.

"Many of these hotels are landmarks, very dramatic venues, like the Taj Mahal in Mumbai," said Brian Jenkins, a security analyst with the [Rand Corporation](#). "What they are going to see in any major hotel is, No. 1, a very cosmopolitan collection of foreign visitors and local elites."

At the Marriott Hotel in Cairo, Egypt, lush gardens are a rare splash of green, drawing the chic and the wealthy, who take their sweet tea and cardamom-spiced coffee at wicker tables under shade umbrellas while checking each other out from behind their designer sunglasses.

The hotel, a former palace built in 1869 for the visiting French Empress Eugenie, has nearly a dozen

restaurants, including the much loved outdoor garden, a rooftop movie theater and a casino. It is also one of the preferred venues for splashy Egyptian weddings, featuring belly dancers and pop stars.

Life at the Marriott used to be free and easy for visitors who looked like they belonged, but layers of security have been added since Islamic unrest spread in Egypt in the 1990s, and new procedures have been put in place since a series of car bomb attacks on luxury hotels in other parts of Egypt in 2004 and 2005. Now, each car is checked for bombs before it can enter the grounds, and guests must pass through metal detectors.

The same is true in Amman, where major hotels now seem like armed camps because of the security barriers, bomb checks and rifle-toting guards.

Magnus Ranstorp, a terrorism analyst with the Swedish National Defense College said terrorists often attack hotels as a way to paralyze the tourist industry, which is vital to countries like Egypt.

"No matter what security measures are taken, there are so many hotels that they really become easy prey," he said. "This is the greatest fear over time. Other groups are looking at Mumbai and will probably mimic this type of attack because it seemed to work."

Jenkins said the best hotels usually have well-developed security systems that make corporate chiefs feel safe sending their employees there. He said a recent Rand inquiry found that people in a hypothetical place called Hotel Land-comprised of all the world's hotel guests at any given point-are 140 times less likely to meet a violent death than a citizen in the United States.

Still, terrorism experts warn that despite recent improvements, most hotels are vulnerable if terrorists spend sufficient time and money developing a plan.

Newberry, the manager of the Serena, said hotels around the world have dramatically upgraded security procedures in response to the increased threat but agreed that they are still vulnerable.

"Inevitably, if a gang of terrorists wants to get into a particular location, whether it's a hotel or another location, they're going to do it one way or another," he said.

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