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Mercedes car bomb? New spin on terror

By John Harrison

THE recent terrorist attacks in London and Glasgow, with the arrests of several foreign-born doctors, force us to re-examine some assumptions.

First is the idea that the terrorist threat is primarily from within the host community. The assumption still has validity, but as was seen with the recent plot against the JFK airport in the United States, the imported terrorist too poses a major threat.

Second, the fact that those involved were well-educated and middle-class should finally bury the notion that poverty causes terrorism. International terrorist organisations cannot conduct global operations with poor, uneducated members.

They are to be differentiated from insurgent groups, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the Abu Sayyaf, which draw on a large rural population and thus will have a high proportion of poor members.

Operationally, there is much public commentary on the direct tactical links to Iraq. Sir John Stevens, former head of the Metropolitan Police and adviser on terrorism to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, has even drawn a link from Bali to Baghdad to Glasgow.

But one must be careful in making this leap. It is clear that the tactics of using gas as a critical component in car bombs has been seen in Iraq. As a tactic it has had a rather mixed record, one that was illustrated in the plots in the UK. The use of incendiary devices is being advanced in Iraq, but incendiaries have been widely discussed in a range of jihadi publications for years. The knowledge is widespread, given that groups across the ideological spectrum have used these types of bombs.

Commentators have also viewed the incidents as either a farewell statement to former premier Tony Blair or a welcome reception for Mr Brown. This may be the case, but it is not standard practice for the jihadi community to conduct operations based on Western political cycles.

The two occasions that this happened - the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen and the Madrid train station bombings - have met with mixed results. So any linkage to the change in leadership in Britain is more likely to be coincidental.

The attack in Britain illustrates how difficult conducting a terrorist operation can be. The cell appears to have been well-

funded; a Mercedes is an atypical choice for a car bomb, and the cell had access to middle-

class housing. As the attackers do not conform to existing profiles and they do not have local support, they do not appear to have attracted the attention of the security services as likely terrorist suspects. Some had been involved in activities which had drawn the attention of the security services, such as protests over the Danish caricatures of the Prophet. Yet, even with these critical advantages, the plots were not successful.

The bombs appear to have been put together in a rapid fashion, with little understanding of the impact of gas fumes on the driver. The cell made no effort to conceal their members' identities or mask their communications. Neither did it appear to have understood the security and surveillance situation in its area of operation. This is particularly odd, given that the cell had the intention to conduct two attacks with the same members. None of this would matter, of course, if the cell had succeeded in the attack on Glasgow.

The fact that the cell members failed to successfully execute any of the attacks illustrates a poorly understood aspect of terrorism: Terrorists are human and are prone to the same fallibility facing the rest of humanity.

Far too often, we are led to believe terrorists are smarter and better skilled than the average person. They are exposed to a different skill set, and perhaps demonstrate more commitment to a cause than the average person, but they are still human.

But while the plots have failed this time, what remains worrying is the new tactic of driving a car bomb into an airport terminal. If the plot had succeeded, the effect could have been devastating. Imagine the impact on the industry if hundreds of passengers were killed while waiting to check in. The aviation industry, needless to say, is in for even more difficult times in the months ahead.

British society remains under threat, but it cannot respond to that threat if it remains as free and open as it is. The British government needs to evaluate the risks and take the necessary and appropriate precautions based on that assessment.

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