Western economies, with the United States at the forefront, would likely be targeted by terrorists, according to a research by an Israeli expert on terrorism.

Professor Gabriel Weimann of the University of Haifa noted that since the attacks on Washington and New York on Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist organizations have realized that enormous damage can be done to the economy and have been increasingly aiming at economically and financially heavyweight targets.

"One might think that (econo-terrorism) is less violent, but this is not the case. Jihadist Internet monitoring alongside terrorist activity in the field is evidence that the economic turn actually influences the terrorists' targets, which have included oil-drilling infrastructures, tourism, international economic institutions and more," said Weimann, who published his latest research on Monday.

Among the ideas bandied about on the Internet were promoting a boycott of multinational corporations, launching targeted assassinations of leaders of world economies, and protracting the warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to drain the resources of Western states.

"Indeed, (terrorist's) future devices will focus on targets that will yield the most economic damage," he added.

The new research brought about different reactions. While some agreed with Weimann's findings, many security experts expressed doubt on the actual effect of this new type of terrorism, and further questioned the possibility of terrorist groups employing it.

MIXED REACTION

Several of the world's leading experts on terrorism and the Internet gave varying responses to Weimann's research during interviews with Xinhua.

"I believe it is an accurate assessment of the situation and of the current thinking of Jihadis, in and out of the various al-Qaida-associated movements and organizations," said Aaron Weisburd, director of the Society for Internet Research, a U.S.-based non-governmental organization, who has considered much of the same data as Weimann's team did.

Weisburd pointed to the failed attempt last December to blow up an American plane flying from Amsterdam to Detroit with 289 passengers on board. While all involved heaved a huge sigh of relief when the device failed to detonate properly, the mission that was cheap to put together is already having a huge financial impact.

"Consider the enormous amounts of money that must now be spent on additional airport security, not to mention spending on efforts to combat the al-Qaida franchise in the Arabian Peninsula," he said.

Rohan Gunaratna, a Singapore-based expert who authored the book Inside al-Qaida, saw Weimann's study as being correct when it comes to the West, but not necessarily so in the Muslim world.

"The threat is shifting from military, political and diplomatic targets to economic targets and population centers in non-Muslim countries. In Muslim countries, the terrorists seek to target military, political and diplomatic targets of Western countries," he said on Tuesday.

Among the dissenting voices regarding Weimann's study is that of Reuven Paz, director of the Project for the Research of Islamist Movements at the Interdisciplinary Center, a private Israeli college located just north of Tel Aviv.

He argued that Weimann's research is simply a rehash of other recent work and that the theory goes back at least 20 years. It was realized in the 1980s that attacks on tourists could have far-reaching effects, said Paz.

The more recent focus on the economy quite likely comes from better-educated Jihadis, many of whom have chosen to live in the West, noted Paz, adding that these are the people who dominate Internet discussion forums.

NO REAL SUCCESS SO FAR

While the jury may be out as to whether attacking economies is the new key focus in the fairly broad arsenal of terrorist organizations, two leading experts believed that talking about this tactic is one thing but implementation is something entirely different.

"That someone writes it doesn't mean it's the policy," said James Lewis, Director of the Technology and Public Policy Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "There's an assumption about effect. Economies are pretty resilient and after a year or so, they might adjust to overcome any terrorist obstacles."
Lewis argued that the Americans tried economic warfare against the Soviet Union for decades but never really succeeded. Meanwhile, he said that he believes that since September 2001, the United States and its allies have put in force many blocks to ensure no repeated collapse of the economy.

Noting that strikes against financial and commercial targets are a repeated theme among members of the online Jihadi community and that clearly much thought has been given to economic terrorism, he questioned whether those groups have the political clout to pull something off in the future.

"They still prefer the showy and violent kinds of attacks," he opined.

The sentiment is shared by John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org, a website focusing on providing security information. "While this may be one goal... thus far they have had no real success since 9/11," he said.

Source: Xinhua