

Tactics and Technology Use: Why Terrorists Are Risk Averse

From the terrorist point of view, the more sophisticated the weapon, the more complicated the operation, the more likely its failure or its lack of success. So for this reason, terrorists have tended, at least historically, to shun weapons or tactics whose success cannot be guaranteed. Because they're so complex in terms of employment as to border on the unappealing, if not from the terrorist point of view, to be almost useless.

So this tells us, though, something very important about the terrorist mentality. In that the salient characteristic for terrorists is the desire, indeed the organizational imperative, to succeed. And the reason why is obvious. If the terrorists can't succeed in the attack, if their weapon or their tactic fails, they're not going to terrorize anyone. This is also parenthetically, I would say, why intelligence is so important to terrorist organizations.

Without good intelligence, terrorists understand their operations cannot succeed. For example, this is why bin Laden and Al-Qaeda spent four full years planning and plotting the 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania before they were absolutely confident of the success of that mission, or that operation. One can say the same thing about the September 11, 2001 attacks, that were planned for at least as long a period, intense periods of reconnaissance, and in turn of training, planning, and plotting to ensure success. Therefore, the terrorists can appear terrorizing, and not inept or incompetent.

Now there are two other reasons why I would argue this technological vacuum or aversion to sophisticated or complex weaponry exists. One is ease and the other is cost. In a completely different context, in a completely different era, the famed painter and artist and inventor, Leonardo da Vinci, once said that simplicity is the ultimate sophistication. The same can be said about terrorists generally.

For most terrorists, the sophistication is in the simplicity. And this is what was exactly so evident on September 11, 2001, when terrorists used a time tried, time proven tactic such as airline hijacking, and yet with a very clever tactical modification, turn those same passenger airliners into human cruise missiles. Now this point about ease and cost, or cost effectiveness or cost benefit, is really born out not so much even in the September 11, 2001 attacks-- although those were a canonical example-- but even more so in the first terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Center that occurred in February 1993.

Then, four terrorists constructed what the FBI later called a witch's brew of homemade, commercially readily available materials that they turned into a powerful explosive mixture. At the heart of that bomb was urea nitrate, an element extracted from ordinary lawn fertilizer. This bomb that they put together not only killed six persons and injured more than 1,000 others, but it

gouged a six story deep, 180 foot wide crater beneath one of the World Trade Center towers.

But what really demonstrates the simplicity and the cost effectiveness was the repercussions of this explosive device of this bomb. The FBI and New York City Police Department estimate that the first 1993 World Trade Center bomb cost about \$400 to construct, yet it caused an estimated \$500 million in damages, both to the tower and the building where it blew up, and also in terms of the lost revenue to the businesses located overhead. So there we really see the cost-benefit of terrorism.

Take another example to show that this is by no means an isolated phenomena. In October, 2000, terrorists belonging to Al-Qaeda staged a waterborne attack using a raft loaded with explosives that they used to ram the USS Cole, a U.S. Navy destroyer that was anchored in the port of Aden in Yemen on a goodwill visit or tour. It's estimated that that attack cost Al-Qaeda no more than \$10,000 to mount. That's including the construction of the bomb, the transport of key operational personnel to Aden, the surveillance, the purchase of the life raft, everything else, didn't cost more than \$10,000.

Yet for a \$10,000 investment, they succeeded in killing 17 American sailors, wounding 39 others, and costing the Navy \$250 million in damages that needed to be repaired on the USS Cole. I mean, right there, these two examples demonstrate why terrorism has become such a popular form of warfare at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st centuries. Because a small number of people-- four individuals in New York with the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, a handful of terrorists operating in Aden-- for a very modest expenditure of money, time, and effort can inflict disproportionate exponentially more costly damages using these very simple but crude bombs.