



October 20, 2017

New Trends in Terrorists' Tactics and Weaponry Against Soft Targets

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Terrorists and other violent assailants attack soft targets, such as hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, places of worship, because they are “open and inviting for everyday activities”¹ making them easy to access and attack, as opposed to “hard” targets, such as government or military facilities, that are often heavily guarded and fortified. While hard targets, particularly government buildings and iconic skyscrapers, represent symbolic trophy targets, especially when their destruction causes massive fatalities and physical damages (such as the destruction of the World Trade Center towers by al Qaida’s crashing aircraft into them on 9/11), the more frequent targeting of soft targets, even with their more limited fatalities and injuries, still yields sufficient casualties and publicity for a terrorist group’s cause to justify and even prioritize attacking them. This is one of the reasons why the frequency of attacking soft targets constitutes a major concern in homeland security.

While firearm shootings continue to be the “weapons of choice” in attacking soft targets, an increasing number of attacks against them now feature other types of tactics and weapons. These include the use of vehicles to ram into unsuspecting crowds on a pavement or in a street, jumping out of such vehicles and using knives to stab further victims, and combining firearm shootings with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Future likely trends in such tactics and weaponry might include the remote use of unmanned aerial systems (UAS, or drones) to fly into a target and detonate themselves or drop IEDs into assembled crowds or vulnerable infrastructure.

This article will now address each of these current and future threat trends.

Firearms & IEDs

In several recent incidents, attackers have used firearms and IEDs in their tactical repertoire. In these incidents, the shooters either placed IEDs at the scene of their attack to delay law enforcement’s emergency response teams, who then had to dismantle them (as was the case in the December 2, 2015 San Bernardino, California, attack, and the October 1, 2017 Las Vegas attack, where IEDs were placed in the shooter’s hotel suite), or left at the shooter’s apartment (as was the case in the Aurora, Colorado, attack on July 20, 2012).

Knifing Attacks

When attackers' access to firearms might be restricted, numerous terrorist attackers have used edged weapons (i.e., knives, machetes and hatchets) to carry out their attacks. These include the numerous attacks by Palestinian terrorists against Israelis, as well as several such attacks in the United States, including the September 18, 2016 attack at the Mall of America, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in which nine people were stabbed by an assailant, who was subsequently killed by a security guard. A hatchet was used by a terrorist attacker on a group of police officers in New York City, on October 25, 2014.

Vehicular Attacks

Vehicles are used in a variety of attacks. In a relatively new trend, terrorists are using cars, vans or trucks (usually rented or stolen) to ram into undefended pedestrian crowds, whether on a pavement or in the street. This advantage of this tactic is that it requires little skill to employ and has the potential to cause mass casualties. In a second type of attack, terrorists place IEDs in vehicles, which are then detonated to cause mass casualties and physical damage. In a third type of attack, vehicles are used for drive-by shootings. Examples include the July 16, 2015 drive-by shooting spree against a military recruiting center in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in which four Marines and a Sailor were killed, and the February 20, 2016 series of shootings by a taxi driver in Kalamazoo County, Michigan, in which six people were killed and two others were injured. In a final type of vehicular attack, on November 28, 2016, after a terrorist rammed his car into a crowd at Ohio State University, in Columbus, Ohio, he got out of his car and attempted to stab additional victims, until he was shot dead by a campus police officer.

Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS)

Although unmanned aerial systems (UASs), also known as drones, have yet to be used as weapons against soft targets, they are considered an imminent threat. In a possible precedent, in October 2011, an Ashland, Massachusetts man, with a university degree in physics, was charged with allegedly plotting to fly C-4 plastic explosives-laden remote-controlled aircraft into the Pentagon. In a more recent incident, on October 10, 2017, a drone that was flying at around 1,500 feet (500 feet above the legal limit), three miles from an airport in Quebec City, Canada, struck a twin-engined commercial prop aircraft that was about to land at the airfield. Although this was likely an accident, it served to demonstrate the severity of such threats against aircraft, which are soft targets in the air. In addition to their current role in surveillance, in worst case scenarios, drones – which are much more maneuverable than earlier generation remote-controlled aircraft – could also be launched against soft targets, such as large assemblies of people, while armed with small explosives or chemical weapons.

Conclusion

Terrorists groups generally seek to attack their adversaries' highest profile and most symbolic (i.e., iconic) targets in order to inflict the utmost fatalities and physical damage and generate widespread publicity (and notoriety) for their cause, but increased security measures make such hardened targets difficult to access. In addition, upgraded counterterrorism tracking measures also make it difficult for terrorist groups to deploy cells in the United States, so lone wolves, with diminished operational and technical capabilities are being mobilized to carry out attacks, with soft targets more easily accessible to them. Under such circumstances, attackers

attempt to identify their adversaries' vulnerabilities for attack, with soft targets representing the easiest to access and attack. With even soft targets being increasingly hardened (at least in relative terms), violent assailants also seek to identify and adapt new tactics and weapons to attack them, so the public safety community needs to continuously be situationally aware of such new attack trends to come up with effective countermeasures to prevent or mitigate their impact.

¹ <https://blogs.state.gov/stories/2017/04/20/en/collaborating-prevent-terrorist-attacks-against-soft-targets>.

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