



Special Analysis

No Holiday from Terrorism

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It was probably no accident that Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab tried to bring down Northwest Airlines flight 253 on Christmas day. Terrorists in general have chosen holidays, anniversaries, and significant dates to carry out their operations, possibly trying to take advantage of the busy holiday season and seeking to maximize the impact of their attacks during times of religious or national significance. The al-Qa'idah organization in particular has chosen holidays and anniversaries to conduct attacks because of their symbolic value, as well as for the effect they have in multiplying the impact of their operations. Had Abdul Mutallab succeeded in implementing his plan, he not only would have killed 270 people, but he would have turned a day of celebration and joy into a national day of mourning. An impact multiplier if ever there was one.

From the standpoint of effective terrorist tradecraft, the large numbers of travelers during holiday periods give terrorists certain advantages. The increased strain on security personnel trying to cope with the increased crowds makes the task of safeguarding the transportation network all the more difficult, leading to the perception that security measures are more lax during these periods.

Al-Qa'idah and Symbolic Dates

Usama Bin Laden in particular appears to consider the symbolic impact of conducting attacks on holidays or important dates to be just as important as the physical damage it causes. He views his role in the struggle with non-believers as almost Messianic and believes that he is part of an inevitable historic march toward the establishment of a universal caliphate. His desire to select what he considers to be propitious dates is probably driven by his need to validate his actions by finding historic precedent for them. Evidence of this assertion can be found in his speeches which contain frequent references to events and battles that took place more than a thousand years ago, as well as to more recent events which in his mind affect the Islamic Ummah, or community of believers. While practical considerations usually outweigh the psychological impact of carrying out attacks on significant dates, the latter always appears to be a factor in his calculations. As an example, even though the date for the so-called "planes operation" was selected for practical reasons, the man who is believed to be the principal architect of the attacks, Khaled Shaikh Mohammad, stated that UBL wanted the attacks to take place on a significant date. Besides selecting targets for their symbolic value - the World Trade

Center as the symbol of American economic power, the Pentagon as the symbol of American military power, and the Capitol Building as a symbol of American democracy - KSM claimed that UBL initially wanted the operation to be carried out on May 12, 2001, which was seven months to the day after the attack on the *U.S.S. Cole*. Mohammad also claimed that a second date that the al-Qa'idah chief favored was in June or July of 2001, when press reports indicated that then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would be visiting the White House. KSM added that in the end he was able to persuade Bin Laden that the attack could not be carried out on either of these dates because the "planes operation" teams were not ready.¹ Nevertheless, the al-Qa'idah leader was looking to magnify the impact of the largest operation he ever mounted by choosing a date that would send a symbolic message to those being attacked or to his own followers.

The most obvious example of al-Qa'idah's preference for selecting such dates is the Millenium plot, which not only featured an attack on Los Angeles International airport, but also included attacks against sites in Jordan that were expected to be frequented by foreign tourists who were celebrating the coming of the new millennium. Fortunately for us, the attacks were aborted thanks to good police and intelligence work here and abroad. We were not, however, so fortunate on Christmas Eve in 2000 when bombings in Bali were all too successful. Eighteen people lost their lives and many more were wounded when the al-Qa'idah-linked Jemaah Islamiyah carried out a series of coordinated attacks against Catholic and Protestant churches in Jakarta and eight other cities. Would-be "shoe bomber" and admitted al-Qa'idah member Richard Reid also selected the Christmas season to attempt to light an explosive charge with the intention of bringing down American Airlines flight 63 on December 22, 2001.

Al-Qa'idah has also selected important dates on the Islamic calendar or those which have historic significance. For example, the organization made an attempt to attack the *U.S.S. The Sullivans* in Aden harbor on Jan 3, 2000, which coincided with "Lailat al-Qadr" or the "Night of Power," which falls on the 26th day of the month of Ramadan on the Islamic calendar. This date was purposely selected because of its importance to Muslims as the anniversary of the revelation of the first verses of the Koran to the Prophet Mohammad. This attack ultimately failed when the vessel carrying the explosive sank, but it was salvaged, its seaworthiness problems were solved, and it was used to devastating effect against the *U.S.S. Cole* on October 12, 2000. Furthermore, al-Qa'idah's massive VBIED attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es-Salam, Tanzania, were carried out on August 7, 1998, which was the eighth anniversary of the beginning of *Operation Desert Storm*, when U.S. forces began arriving in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1990.

Other Groups

Al-Qa'idah was not the only terrorist group that saw possible advantages in carrying out attacks during the busy Christmas holiday period. On Christmas Eve in 1985 the Abu Nidal Organization attacked Israeli targets at the airports in Vienna, Austria, and Rome, Italy, killing 19 and wounding 138. Libya also chose the Christmas season to bomb Pan Am 103 on December 21, 1988. In fact terrorists of all stripes have tried to time attacks

to coincide with holidays or significant dates. The barracks housing U.S. troops at the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia were struck with a massive VBIED on June 25, 1996, which coincided that year with the date of 20 Safar on the Islamic calendar. This date marks the end of the period of mourning for the death of the Imam Hussein on the plain of Karbala on the tenth ('Ashura) day of the month of Muharram, which is one of the most important dates on the Shi'ite calendar.² In fact, throughout history there have been many attacks on Shi'ites who were commemorating 'Ashura. One of the most notable recent attacks was attributed to al-Qa'idah in Iraq on March 2, 2004, when more than 100 people were killed near Karbala and 58 more were killed near the Kadhimiya Shrine in Baghdad. More recently on December 28 of this year, a suicide bomber targeted Pakistan's largest 'Ashura procession in Karachi, killing at least 33 people and wounding many more.

Domestic terrorists have also used chosen symbolic dates to implement their attacks. Timothy McVeigh conducted a massive attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the fire at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas.

Conclusion

Certain terrorist attacks, such as those carried out during the Christmas season or during the 'Ashura commemorations, are intended to send the message to the targeted population that they are not safe even on their holiest days or during their most solemn commemorations. On the other hand, attacks perpetrated on anniversaries, such as the East Africa or Oklahoma City bombings, are aimed at those who might sympathize with the attackers and their cause. Such attacks are meant to set an example for the would-be followers to emulate and to exhort them to mount their own attacks. No matter what the motivation, holydays or holidays are times that call for heightened awareness on the part of security personnel. Also, being aware of dates that are significant to various terrorist groups could have a certain predictive value in determining when they might strike.

¹ The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 250.

² This was a clear indication that the attack was perpetrated by a Shi'a, vice Sunni, group. Despite the fact that some still attribute the Khobar attack to al-Qa'idah, an FBI press release dated June 21, 2001 announced the indictment of 13 members of the pro-Iranian Saudi Hizballah, a.k.a. the Hizballah al-Hijaz, for their part in the bombing.

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