

Why the Boston Bombers Succeeded

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When seeking to place an attack like the April 15 Boston Marathon bombing into context, it is helpful to classify the actors responsible, if possible. Such a classification can help us understand how an attack fits into the analytical narrative of what is happening and what is likely to come. These classifications will consider factors such as ideology, state sponsorship and perhaps most important, the kind of operative involved.

In a case where we are dealing with an apparent jihadist operative, before we can classify him or her we must first have a clear taxonomy of the jihadist movement. At Stratfor, we generally consider the jihadist movement to be divided into three basic elements: the al Qaeda core organization, the regional jihadist franchises, such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and grassroots operatives who are radicalized, inspired and perhaps equipped by the other two tiers but who are not members of either.

Within the three-tier jihadist movement there exist two distinct types of operatives. One of these is the professional terrorist operative, a person who is a member of the al Qaeda core or of one of the regional franchises. These individuals swear loyalty to the leader and then follow orders from the organization's hierarchy. Second, there are amateur operatives who never join a

group and whose actions are not guided by the specific orders of a hierarchical group. They follow a bottom-up or grassroots organizational model rather than a hierarchical or top-down approach.

There is a great deal of variety among professional terrorists, especially if we break them down according to the functions they perform within an organization, roles including that of planners, finance and logistics specialists, couriers, surveillance operatives, bombmakers, et cetera. There is also a great deal of variety within the ranks of grassroots operatives, although it is broken down more by their interaction with formal groups rather than their function. At one end of the grassroots spectrum are the lone wolf operatives, or phantom cells. These are individuals or small groups who become radicalized by jihadist ideology, but who do not have any contact with the organization. In theory, the lone wolf/phantom cell model is very secure from an operational security standpoint, but as we've discussed, it takes a very disciplined and driven individual to be a true lone wolf or phantom cell leader, and consequently, we see very few of them.

At the other end of the grassroots spectrum are individuals who have had close interaction with a jihadist group but who never actually joined the organization. Many of them have even attended militant training camps, but they didn't become part of the hierarchical group to the point of swearing an oath of allegiance to the group's leaders and taking orders from the organization. They are not funded and directed by the group.

Indeed, al Qaeda trained tens of thousands of men in its training camps in Afghanistan, Sudan and Pakistan but very few of the men they trained actually ended up joining al Qaeda. Most of the men the group instructed received basic military training in things like using small arms, hand-to-hand combat and basic fire and maneuver. Only the very best from those basic combat training courses were selected to receive advanced training in terrorist tradecraft techniques, such as bombmaking, surveillance, clandestine communications and document forgery. But even of the students who received advanced training in terrorist tradecraft, only a few were ever invited to join the al Qaeda core, which remained a relatively small vanguard organization.

Many of the men who received basic training traveled to fight jihad in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya or returned home to join insurgent or militant groups. Others would eventually end up joining al Qaeda franchise groups in places like Yemen, Iraq, Libya and Algeria. Still others received some basic training but then returned home and never really put their new skills into practice.

Most grassroots jihadists fall along a continuum that stretches between the lone wolf and someone who received advanced terrorist training but never joined al Qaeda or another formal militant group.

Whether the two men suspected of carrying out the April 15 Boston Marathon attack knowingly followed al Qaeda's blueprint for simple attacks by grassroots actors, their actions were fairly consistent with what we have come to expect from such operatives. Certainly based upon what we have seen of this case so far, the Tsarnaev brothers did not appear to possess sophisticated terrorist tradecraft.

For example, regarding the bombs employed in the attack and during the police chase, everything we have seen still points to very simple devices, such as pipe bombs and pressure cooker devices. From a bombmaking tradecraft standpoint, we have yet to see anything that could not be fabricated by reading Inspire magazine, spending a little bit of time on YouTube and conducting some experimentation. As a comparison, consider the far larger and more complex improvised explosive device Anders Behring Breivik, the Oslo bomber, constructed. We know from Breivik's detailed journal that he was a self-taught bombmaker using directions he obtained on the Internet. He was also a lone wolf. And yet he was able to construct a very large improvised explosive device. □ Also, although the Tsarnaev brothers did not hold up a convenience store as initially reported, they did conduct an express kidnapping that caused them to have extended contact with their victim while they visited automatic teller machines. They told the victim that they were the bombers and then allowed the victim to live. Such behavior is hardly typical of professional terrorist operatives.

Grassroots Theory

As it has become more difficult for professional terrorists to travel to the United States and the West in general, it has become more difficult for jihadist organizations to conduct attacks in these places. Indeed, this difficulty prompted groups like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to attempt to attack the United States by dispatching an operative with an underwear bomb and to use printer cartridge bombs to attack cargo aircraft. In response to this difficulty, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula began to adopt the grassroots into their operational doctrine. They first began promoting this approach in 2009 in their Arabic-language magazine Sada al-Malahim. The al Qaeda core organization embraced this approach in May 2010 in an English-language video featuring Adam Gadahn.

In July 2010, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula launched an English-language magazine called Inspire dedicated to radicalizing and equipping grassroots jihadists. Despite the losses that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has experienced on the battlefield, it has continued to devote a great deal of its limited resources toward propagating this concept. It has continued to publish Inspire even after the magazine's founder and editor, Samir Khan, was killed in an American missile strike in Yemen.

The grassroots strategy was perhaps most clearly articulated in the third edition of Inspire magazine, which was published in November 2010 following the failed October 29, 2010,

printer bomb operation. In a letter from the editor in which Khan explained what he referred to as "Operation Hemorrhage," he wrote:

"However, to bring down America we do not need to strike big. In such an environment of security phobia that is sweeping America, it is more feasible to stage smaller attacks that involve fewer players and less time to launch and thus we may circumvent the security barriers America has worked so hard to erect. This strategy of attacking the enemy with smaller, but more frequent operations is what some may refer to the strategy of a thousand cuts. The aim is to bleed the enemy to death."

In Adam Gadahn's May 2010 message entitled "A Call to Arms," Gadahn counsels lone wolf jihadists to follow a three-pronged target selection process. They should choose a target with which they are well acquainted, a target that is feasible to hit and a target that, when struck, will have a major impact. The Tsarnaev brothers did all three in Boston.

Implications

Yet despite this clearly articulated theory, it has proved very difficult for jihadist ideologues to convince grassroots operatives to conduct simple attacks using readily available items like in the "build a bomb in the kitchen of your mom" approach, which they have advocated for so long.

This is because most grassroots jihadists have sought to conduct huge, spectacular attacks -- attacks that are outside of their capabilities. This has meant that they have had to search for help to conduct their plans. And that search for help has resulted in their arrest, just as Adam Gadahn warned they would be in his May 2010 message.

There were many plots disrupted in 2012 in which grassroots operatives tried to act beyond their capabilities. These include:

- On Nov. 29, 2012, two brothers from Florida, Raees Alam Qazi and Sheheryar Alam Qazi, were arrested and charged with plotting attacks in New York.
- On Oct. 17, 2012, Bangladeshi national Quazi Nafis was arrested as part of an FBI sting operation after he attempted to detonate a vehicle bomb outside New York's Federal Reserve Bank.
- On Sept. 15, 2012, Adel Daoud was arrested after he parked a Jeep Cherokee outside a Chicago bar and attempted to detonate the bomb he thought it contained. This was also an FBI sting operation.

But the carnage and terrorist theater caused by the Boston attack have shown how following the simple attack model can be highly effective. This will certainly be pointed out in future editions of Inspire magazine, and grassroots operatives will be urged to follow the model established by the Tsarnaev brothers. Unlike operatives like Faisal Shahzad who attempted to

go big themselves and failed, the brothers followed the blueprint for a simple attack and the model worked.

It is quite possible that the success of the Boston bombing will help jihadist ideologues finally convince grassroots operatives to get past their grandiose plans and begin to follow the simple attack model in earnest. If this happens, it will obviously have a big impact on law enforcement and intelligence officials who have developed very effective programs of identifying grassroots operatives and drawing them into sting operations. They will now have to adjust their operations.

While these grassroots actors do not have the capability of professional terrorist operatives and do not pose as severe a threat, they pose a much broader, amorphous threat. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies generally do not deal well with ambiguity.

There are simply too many soft targets to protect and some of these simple attacks will inevitably succeed. This means that this low-level broad threat will persist and perhaps even intensify in the immediate future.

As we've previously discussed, the best defense against the grassroots threat are grassroots defenders. These include the police and alert citizens who report suspicious activity -- like people testing bomb designs -- a frequent occurrence before actual bomb attacks. The slogan "If you see something, say something," has been mocked as overly simplistic, but it is nonetheless a necessity in an environment where the broad, ambiguous threat of grassroots terrorism far outstrips the ability of the authorities to see everything. Taking a proactive approach to personal and collective security also beats the alternative of living in terror and apprehensively waiting for the next simple attack.

It is also very important for people to maintain the proper perspective on terrorism. Like car crashes and cancer and natural disasters, terrorism is part of the human condition. People should take prudent, measured actions to prepare for such contingencies and avoid becoming victims (vicarious or otherwise). It is the resilience of the population and its perseverance that will ultimately determine how much a terrorist attack is allowed to terrorize. By separating terror from terrorism, citizens can deny the practitioners of terror the ability to magnify their reach and power.

Send us your thoughts on this report.

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