

9/11, A Decade Later - Perspectives on terrorism from across the Atlantic

Pre 9-11, the security community in Europe assumed that individual terrorists wanted to attack from afar and take part in more than one operation. The danger had been mainly from the Provisional IRA and Basque separatists.

Since the 2001 attacks, however, authorities have confronted threats not just in territories which are the subject of religious or political dispute (Northern Ireland and the France-Spain border), but also in countries existing peacefully, where immigrants or foreign nationals have adopted radical ideologies.

The thinking of most UK citizens that “a terrorist attack will never happen to me” changed on September 11th. A new perspective for me and my colleagues came with the knowledge that of the 67 British people killed, one was a Cantor Fitzgerald broker hailing from our small English coastal town who perished in the World Trade Center’s North Tower. The loss of UK nationals exceeded any incident, including Lockerbie.



Following security issues in the custodial sector as I do, it is disturbing to learn of the radicalization of Muslims by their peers within British prisons. The issue has been highlighted by the Royal United Services Institute, which has published a report claiming that up to 800 “potentially violent radicals,” who have not been convicted of terrorist offenses, could be released from prisons in England and Wales over the next 10 years. The report’s authors claim that these prisoners are potential recruits for a “new wave” of activity which will see a shift from major synchronous attacks to smaller, random incidents against a wider range of targets.

At the level of specific technology, an area which has advanced significantly in Britain since the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks is video analytics. Encouraged, in part, by a certification process of detection “scenarios” considered crucial by the scientific laboratories of the UK Home Office, subtle combinations of potentially threatening behavior can now be detected by artificial intelligence residing in surveillance cameras or in the centralized computers that manage them. The pressing technological challenge for homeland security in this field, which has not yet been fully solved, is facial recognition.

The kind of extremism which can lead to 9/11-style attacks is being tackled in the UK at various community levels. In addition to prisons, the UK government is addressing educational establishments, notably after it was discovered that Farouk Abdulmutallab had gained a degree in engineering from University College in London, an Ivy League equivalent institution. Abdulmutallab is accused of attempting to detonate explosives aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 en route from Amsterdam to Detroit in December 2009. Popularly known as “The Underwear Bomber,” he is currently in custody in Michigan awaiting legal proceedings.

The UK government’s strategy to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism includes the “Prevent” initiative which has revealed that more than 30 percent of those convicted for Al Qaeda-associated terrorist offenses in the UK between 1999 and 2009 are known to have attended college, university or a higher education institution.

It is vital that facility managers on both sides of the Atlantic should have free access to security auditing resources, including quantitative risk modeling which would allow them to gauge their behavioral and operational frailties and readiness for attack in a structured manner, without undue influence from short-term political campaigns.

Terrorists are known for their adaptive learning and “copycat” strategies, behavior which should be echoed in the dissemination of best practice information through the security community. We need to widen our perspective in terms of unconventional attack modes and consider new possibilities, such as agricultural sabotage, hijacking of passenger ships and attacks on so-called “soft” targets, such as the unplanned occupation of a hotel by gunmen during the 2011 incidents in Mumbai, India.

Disruption of emergency response measures, such as public address announcements and voice alarms after an attack on a crowded public space, is now known to be a terrorist objective. But, emerging digital media are helping to share not just social information but crisis updates which can support conventional measures.

In 2010, a gunman, Raoul Moat, spent three days on the run in northeast England during an operation that involved 160 police officers, sniper teams, helicopters, dogs, armored anti-terrorist police vehicles and even a Royal Airforce jet. In the aftermath, it emerged that the single most useful communication tool for civilians and authorities, as events unfolded, had been Twitter.

Kevin Brownell is a director of c-hq security services, a UK security technology and resilience consultancy. He can be reached at:

kevin.brownell@chqconsulting.co.uk