Homeland Security Series: Installment IV: Evolving Terrorism

This September marks the tenth anniversary of the 9-11 tragedy. Since this event, the threat of terrorist activity in the United States and abroad continues to concern local law enforcement and national security personnel around the world. This podcast will address the increase in the number of disrupted terrorist attacks, the rise of home grown terrorism, and the continued threat of large scale attacks. It will also discuss how terrorism continues to evolve and the political and economic impact for the foreseeable future.

Please join us for the fourth installment of the Homeland Security series as we listen to Brian D. Finlay share his perspective on the status of terrorism and terrorism preparedness. Brian is a Senior Associate and Director of Stimson's Managing Across Boundaries Program at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. He currently works on issues of weapons proliferation, illicit trade networks, economic development, and private sector engagement.

Brian, the terrorism threat environment has changed dramatically since September 11th, 2001. Can you describe how the threat has evolved and what that environment looks like today?

Well, not only has the terrorist threat changed dramatically since 9-11, but indeed it has changed quite dramatically since this Lexcast® series was first launched just two or three years ago. I think that there is an emerging consensus among most intelligence analysts and terrorism watchers that although the threat may be less severe today, it is far more complicated and disparate than in the days and months immediately following the initial terrorist attacks on 9-11 back in 2001. You recall, that exactly one month after the terrorist attacks on 9-11 on October 11, 2001, intelligence analysts informed President Bush and the White House that a CIA source code named "Dragon Fire" had reported that al-Qaeda had obtained a ten kiloton nuclear weapon and smuggled it into the heart of New York City.

Now, the detonation of such a device has serious implications clearly. Not only would most of Manhattan been flattened by a bomb of that size, but it would have immediately killed up to half a million Americans. Now, the CIA source found that the report was quite plausible and a similar weapon, had supposedly been stolen from Russia, which in deed, has many ten kiloton nuclear weapons and, indeed, other intelligence reports seem to line up suggesting that such a device could well have been missing from the Russian nuclear arsenal. Now, the CIA had additionally picked up al-Qaeda chatter that the United States was about to experience an "American Hiroshima". President Bush immediately dispatched a search party to New York to search for the weapon and sent Dick Chaney and other officials out of town, out of Washington to ensure the continuity of government in case a weapon of such magnitude were detonated in Washington itself. Now, fortunately no device was found and the intelligence was ultimately determined to be a hoax, but at the time no one doubted the validity and possibility of such an event occurring.

Now today, evidence seems to suggest that the likelihood of a single well orchestrated catastrophic attack has diminished and instead we have seen the diversification of the threat. Al-Qaeda Central is certainly less capable than it was on September 11th due to successful intelligence operations; police collaboration around the world, obviously U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan has dramatically lessened al-Qaeda's capacity to perpetrate a significant attack. However, al-Qaeda Central continues to be quite highly motivated and clearly willing to perpetrate an attack and encourage other attacks against American citizens and American interests around the world.

Indeed, a number of splinter groups have emerged. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is perhaps one that is most notable as of late operating out of Yemen, and they were the organization responsible for the Detroit attempted bombing of the U.S. airliner over Detroit. In addition, they have been responsible or claimed responsibility for placing bombs aboard cargo planes just months ago. In addition, Al-Shabaab in Somalia has successfully recruited Somalia Americans to perpetrate and perpetuate the war in that country. Not only are their operations a threat to stability in Somalia itself, but indeed to wider U.S. interests across East Africa and in deed to U.S. citizens themselves. For instance, in Uganda that organization perpetrated a series of bombings back in July of 2001 that killed 70 individuals.

In addition, other groups including al-Qaeda in Iraq continue to operate the Taliban in Pakistan and obviously in Afghanistan itself, as well as an array of other terrorist groups are active around the globe and are perpetrating a greater number of smaller and more focused attacks in comparison to the events on 9-11 itself. As we look I think in aggregate over the past year, we get a very clear picture of a proliferation in the number of less deadly, but certainly numerous attacks with truly global reach. We've seen incidents in Pakistan, in Denmark, the Philippines, Yemen, Turkey and the United and Arab Emirates and Sweden, and of course, right here in the United States. You recall in the summer of 2010, it was clear that an al-Qaeda affiliated group was responsible for the attempted Times Square bombing in New York City.

I think the lesson that many analysts have learned and that we have drawn over the course of the past year or two is that we have evolved from the period immediately after 9-11 in which we feared another very large scale attack, to a period today where we are combating terrorists literally around the globe as they perpetrate a smaller number of still deadly attacks.

Would you talk about the concept of "home grown terrorism"? How is it changing the nature of terrorism today?

Unfortunately, this is yet another indication of the evolving terrorist threat, both globally as well as here in the United States. With respect to the terrorist threat here in the U.S. over the course of the past two years since around the time President Obama was inaugurated we have seen, I think, an increasing Americanization, if you will, of the leadership of al-Qaeda and affiliated groups as well as a disturbing trend, in which more and more Americans are attaching themselves to these terrorists and extremist groups. For instance, a Yemen-American cleric who grew up in New Mexico is today playing an important operation overall in al-Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula operating out of Yemen.

Similarly, a Saudi-American who grew up in Brooklyn and in Florida, is now effectively al-Qaeda's director of external operations. For instance, it was he that tasked Nibilizazi and two other Americans to attack targets in the United States back in 2009. Similarly, about this convert to Islam from Alabama is both a key propagandist and a military commander for Al-Shabaab operating out of Somalia and David Headley from Chicago played an important role in scoping the targets for the terrorist attacks that occurred in Mumbai late in 2008 that resulted in the deaths of more than one-hundred sixty people in that country. Al-Qaeda and other like-minded groups have also successfully attracted to their ranks dozens of American citizens and residents as really "foot soldiers" since 2009 to operate and conduct terrorist operations around the globe.

Previously, it was assumed that the American melting pot would be a fire wall against the radicalization and recruitment of American citizens and residents. However, that seems to not be the case over the course of the past, at least two years. Well over a year ago, federal authorities became aware of the radicalization and recruitment occurring here in the United States when a group of Somali Americans started disappearing from the Minneapolis St. Paul area and turning up in Somalia to fight with an al-Qaeda affiliated group there. This was not an isolated incident, unfortunately; from Minnesota to San Diego, to Maine, to Boston, Ohio, and elsewhere Somali-Americans who have left the United States to train in Somalia are, indeed today, being trained by al-Qaeda. The United States is generally used to being the target of militant terrorist, but now the country is also increasingly exporting American militants to conduct Jihad operations overseas as well as, of course, potentially being victimized by these individuals here in the United States itself.

Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani-American responsible for the Times Square bombing last summer is testament to the seriousness of this threat and it is one of an increasing array and, series of examples of Americans being radicalized by al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. It's also one that is extremely difficult for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to get their arms around and prevent.

What is the current status of "Al Qaeda Central" and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula? Are they a continued threat?

Well, although we've seen the proliferation of terrorist groups since 9-11, it really is al-Qaeda Central and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that have been at the forefront certainly of media attention over the course of the past couple of years and I think for good reason. As of late, we've heard pronouncements from the CIA and indeed the CIA director himself as well as others in the intelligence community that have really down played the continued threat of al-Qaeda Central leadership in Pakistan. It's clear, however, that particular entity continues to serve as a rallying point for terrorist around the globe.

We have not captured Osama Bin Laden. Al-Qaeda's ideology and tactics have clearly spread to a wide range of militant groups across South Asia. For instance, the Taliban in Afghanistan alone is estimated to number about 25,000 individuals. Al-Qaeda Central has also seeded a number of groups around the Middle East and North Africa that are now acting in an al-Qaeda like manner with little or no contact with al-Qaeda Central itself. The danger of al-Qaeda comes not from its central leadership in Pakistan, but through its cooperation really with other like-minded groups. The extent of cooperation between al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, for example, could be seen in the suicide bombing that killed seven CIA officers and contractors in the American base in Eastern

Afghanistan on December 30, 2009. In addition, three al-Qaeda Central planners were responsible for recruiting the three individuals here in the United States, training them in the use of improvised explosive devices and initiating a plot to attack the New York City subway in September of 2009.

In short, I would say that al-Qaeda leadership continues to both serve as an inspiration to like-minded groups as well as continues to conduct its own operational terrorist activities that directly threaten the Unites States. Similarly, al-Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula was the group responsible for Farouk Abdulmutallab botched attempt to explode a bomb on Northwest Airlines, Flight 253 over Detroit on Christmas Day in 2009. You will recall that Abdulmutallab boarded the flight in Amsterdam bound for Detroit with some three-hundred passengers and crew on board. He had secreted in his underwear a bomb made of plastic explosives that was not detected by airport security in Amsterdam or in the Nigerian city of Logos where he had originally flown from. Now, some combination of his own ineptitude, faulty bomb construction and certainly the quick actions of the passengers and crew aboard that flight who subdued him and extinguished the fire ultimately prevented an explosion that would likely have brought down that plane near Detroit.

More recently AQAP was responsible for the attempted bombing of two cargo planes destined for the United States and in November of 2010 the group announced Operation Hemorrhage, that it said was designed to capitalize on "the security phobia that is sweeping the United States." The program calls for a large number of inexpensive small scale attacks against the United States and its interests abroad with the intent of weakening the U.S. economy. In aggregate, what is clear is that while AQAP has proven unlucky thus far, eventually they will perfect their bomb making techniques if they have not already, and successful attacks in future far more deadly than those of the past are certainly likely. In short, both al-Qaeda Central as well as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula both present serious challenges to the United States, both home and abroad.

Are there other terrorist groups that could pose a threat to the United States or to American interests?

Well, beyond al-Qaeda Central and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula which we have discussed, we also know that there are an array of other terrorist groups that could and in some cases have posed a direct threat to the United States Homeland or to U.S. interests abroad. I mentioned earlier Al-Shabaab in Somalia which continues to inflict casualties both within Somalia and increasingly across East Africa and Uganda and Kenya and even reaching beyond Africa itself to Denmark in a recent incident. There is also a perhaps diminished, but enduring threat from al-Qaeda in Iraq. We've not only seen continued attacks across that country, but also attempts to reach beyond the borders of that country. Of course, the Taliban in Pakistan has begun to reach beyond Pakistan's borders now to plot attacks in Europe and in the United States.

It was in 2008 when for the first time, the Taliban as a movement began planning seriously to attack targets in the West. You will recall that the Pakistani Taliban's leader sent a team of would-be suicide bombers to Barcelona to attack the subway system there in January of 2008. In March of 2009, the group threatened to attack in the United States telling the Associated Press by phone that the group would soon launch an attack in Washington that would "amaze everyone in the world". And, of course, the Mumbai attacks of 2008 also showed that al-Qaeda's ideas about attacking Western and Jewish

targets had also spread to Pakistani militant groups which had previously focused only on Indian targets.

Is there an on-going threat from terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction?

Well, as I mentioned there is a growing sense from terrorism analysts outside of government that the weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and terrorist threat emanating from their acquisition has diminished in favor of smaller and more numerous attacks that kill more people on a more regular basis. And although we have seen less evidence, for instance, of al-Qaeda pursuing nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the popular press I would suggest to you that neither U.S. intelligence nor weapons of mass destruction analysts would arrive at the same conclusion that the terrorism community seems to have arrived at particularly, after a survey of several simple facts.

First, we know that the technology to build a weapon of mass destruction is more readily available to more individuals in more countries, in more corners of the globe than ever before. This is simply a fact of globalization, pharmaceutical technologies, and biotechnologies for instance that could be used for various purposes to build a biological weapon, certainly are proliferating to areas of South and Southeast Asia, across Latin America and parts of Africa where terrorist activity has been high, similarly dual-use technology innovation and production. We are increasingly seeing in the nuclear sphere in areas across East Asia and South East Asia and elsewhere around the globe. The transiting hubs through Dubai, through Panama, and other countries around the globe simply the ability to innovate, manufacture, produce, or otherwise transship a weapon of mass destruction and requisite technologies to build those weapons is growing simply because of the forces of globalization.

Secondly, we know that this technology democratization, if you will, means that anyone from proliferant states like Iran to terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda will therefore have greater access to weapons technologies.

Third, I think we also know that al-Qaeda and others have not lost their desire to perpetrate a catastrophic attack of the magnitude as big as or even greater than 9-11. Even while they add new tactics to their repertoire, we know that their intent to perpetrate a massive catastrophic attack involving a weapon of mass destruction has not diminished. So because of the continued demand as well as growing supply, I think the likelihood of a WMD acquisition by a terrorist group remains high and we should be guarded and therefore, I think, we should be doing everything we can to prevent this from a government basis, from a private sector basis, but also in terms of the private sector I think we need to be doing everything we can to prepare for its eventuality.

What are the likely future targets of terrorists and their tactics?

Well, the truthful answer, of course, is that we don't know. The meddlesome challenge of dealing with the terrorist threat is, of course, that it is inherently and, indeed, by design unpredictable. A survey, however of recent incidents can lead us to draw upon several trends to predict potential future action of terrorists.

First, there is unquestionably a move to smaller and more frequent attacks. Unfortunately, the Times Square bomber demonstrated to other terrorists that even

acting alone one can deal a serious blow to the United States here in the homeland or, internationally.

Two, I would say that certainly the WMD terrorism threat has certainly not gone away despite the last attention given to it in the popular press. It's clear that al-Qaeda Central and other splinter groups remain committed to obtaining a nuclear, biological and chemical weapon and equally remain committed to perpetrating a single catastrophic attack.

Third, dating back to 9-11, commercial aviation has been a key target of terrorists. A cell of British Pakistanis some trained by al-Qaeda plotted, if you will recall, to bring down seven passenger jets flying to the United States and Canada from the United Kingdom during the summer of 2006. During the trial of those men accused in the plane's plot, the prosecution argued that some fifteen hundred passengers would have died if all seven targeted planes had been brought down and most of the victims would have been Americans, Britains, and Canadians. This was followed by, Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempt to bring down Northwest Airlines flight over Detroit on Christmas Day in 2009 and even more recently the plot by al-Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula to bring down those two cargo planes destined for the United States.

Fourth, since the 9-11 attacks we know that al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups have increasingly attacked economic and business targets and this is also a trend that is likely to continue. The shift in tactics was in part a response to the fact that the traditional pre 9-11 targets such as American embassies, warships, military bases and so forth are now better defended in the wake of 9-11 while the so-called "soft economic targets" while being both more ubiquitous are also easier to attack. In 2002, you will recall that a group of 11 French defense contractors were killed as they left the Sheraton Hotel in Karachi which was heavily damaged as a result of that terrorist attack. In 2003, suicide attackers bombed the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta. Bombers struck it again six years later and simultaneously also attacked a Ritz Carlton Hotel in the Indonesian capital.

I think that such attacks are likely to continue as businesses of course, cannot turn themselves into fortresses though they should, engage in as much mitigative behavior as possible to prevent such attacks from succeeding. I would also say finally, that the fact that American citizens have engaged in suicide operations in Somalia raises the very real possibility that suicide attacks could start taking place here in the United States itself compounded by the fact that we have seen a new era of homegrown terrorism, if you will. This is a threat that must be taken seriously by the United States Government as well as by all Americans.

Brian, thank you for sharing your expertise on this very timely and complicated topic.

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For more information on Lexington's Property Terrorism coverage, please contact John Cogliano at (617) 330-8250 or john.cogliano@chartisinsurance.com.