

THE MUMBAI MENACE

Over the last few years terrorist and militant organisations have been using ever-more ambitious and sophisticated tactics that are extremely difficult to safeguard against. This was exemplified by the recent attack on Nairobi’s Westgate shopping centre. Essentially these are: seize, kill and die – jihadist fighters take a location and hold out until they are all dead. Another hallmark of these operations is that they are often multinational, drawing on a plethora of eager foreign recruits. Such attacks are effectively commando-style operations but without the exit strategy.

During past infamous terror attacks, such as the seizing of the Achille Lauro by the Palestinian Liberation Front in 1985 and the Olympics Munich Massacre in 1972 carried out by the Black September Palestinian group, the terrorists had an escape plan. In both instances the Palestinians expected to fly to freedom having carried out their mission – it was not intended as a one-way trip. In the decades since, the proliferation of the suicide bomber – thanks to the likes of Palestinian Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah and the Afghan Haqqani network – seems to have led to terror commando missions that have only one outcome.

The big worry for the UK’s security apparatus is that such an attack could happen here. Certainly the killing of soldier Lee Rigby on the streets of Woolwich, south London on 22 May 2013 shows that terrorists are not only becoming increasingly brazen but also reckless. The killing of Rigby signalled a sea change from the

normal annual bomb plots that are a staple of British jihadist cells. There have been conspiracies to kill British servicemen before, but fortunately none ever came to fruition.

Britain’s security services clearly have their work cut out constantly monitoring ongoing threats and deciding when to act. Dramatically, four men were arrested in a series of widespread raids across London on 13 October 2013. The authorities said the police acted following intelligence on a jihadist plot that was described as “serious” and which would have involved the use of firearms. Clearly this raised the alarm bells at the possibility of drive-by shootings or worse a Westgate-style attack. In particular, the City of London has always been a prime target for potential terrorist grandstanding.

The seriousness of this latest plot was such that two 25-year-old males were stopped in their car in White Chapel, east London by an officer firing two shotgun Hatton rounds. Known as “master keys”, these are normally used for breaching locked doors, and are fired at very close range. They can also be used to blow out tyres. Intelligence must have indicated that the two individuals posed an imminent threat to justify the risk of arresting them in the street.

The men had little chance of escape, as their vehicle was surrounded by about half a dozen police cars that also blocked off the road in the process. According to nearby witnesses, they were hauled from their vehicle and pushed up against the window of a nearby restaurant,

Terror tactics: the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai burns on 27 November 2008

“Since Mumbai, the ‘seize, kill and die’ type of operation has become another option for the world’s militants and was a great concern during the London Olympics.”

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searched and cuffed. One of those arrested was a British national of Turkish origin the other was a British national of Algerian extraction. At the same time, a 29-year-old British national of Pakistani origin was arrested in Peckham, south east London and a 28-year-old British national of Azerbaijani origin was arrested in Bayswater, west London. In total six different London properties were reportedly searched as well as two cars. All of which indicated a sizeable terrorist cell.

Ever since the Mumbai attack of 2008, the seize, kill and die-type of operation has become yet another option for the world's militants and was a very real concern during the London Olympics. In 2008 the Kashmiri separatist movement Lashkar-e-Taiba conducted a bloody attack in the Indian city. They launched 12 co-ordinated shootings and bombings that included attacks on a number of hotels, one of which was the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel. Nine of the ten attackers were killed during the three-day battle to clear them, along with 166 civilians and security personnel. What was so unnerving about this attack was not only its scale and ambition, but also the fact that the attackers had clearly decided this was a suicide operation. Once they were cornered by the Indian security forces they only had two options: surrender or die. They opted for the latter.

Notably, this Mumbai style of operation was repeated by the Taliban in Afghanistan three years later, in September 2011. In an audacious show of strength a ten-man suicide squad planned to attack the US embassy and Nato headquarters. Arriving in Kabul disguised under burqas (the traditional face covering robe worn by some Afghan women) at least five attackers positioned themselves in a partially-built multi-storey building. From there they launched an attack on the nearby diplomatic quarter. Three suicide attacks were also launched against police buildings in other parts of the city.

From the multi-storey building the attackers fired rocket-propelled grenades toward the American and other embassies, as well as the Nato HQ. Although up to seven grenades landed in the US embassy compound they posed little serious threat as they were firing at maximum range. Nonetheless, at least seven people were killed and 19 wounded during the attacks. Once again all the attackers were killed. According to General John R Allen, Commander of Nato and US forces in Afghanistan, the Haqqani network, one of three factions allied to the Taliban, were held responsible. This was the most wide-ranging attack on Kabul since the Taliban were ousted in 2001.

During the Taliban's spring offensive of 2012 they again struck foreign embassies, Nato's HQ and the Afghan parliament building, but on this occasion they did not take and hold anywhere. The Haqqani network was then thought to be responsible for the daring assault on Camp Bastion in Helmand province in the summer of 2012. This attack saw a militant assault team cover the highly exposed ground outside the camp and breach the perimeter wire. They then infiltrated Bastion and attacked the US Marine Harrier jet flight

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line, destroying a number of aircraft. Clearly attacking the heart of British and American military operations in Helmand was a suicide mission, as the base is home to thousands of troops. Of the attacking force, 18 were killed and just one captured.

The Mumbai tactics were also used by al-Shabaab this year in Kenya. On 21 September 2013 a “multinational” team of militants seized and held the Westgate shopping centre in Nairobi. Once again it was reported that some of the attackers disguised themselves as women to infiltrate the building. Their target was non-Muslim shoppers.

As in Mumbai and Kabul, the speed, scope and ferocity of the Westgate assault took the authorities completely by surprise. Initial reports suggested up to 15 militants were involved – but the Kenyan army later stated it had killed all four attackers. This group was led by Abu Baara al-Sudani (though it is not clear whether he was Sudanese) and included Omar Nabhan and Khattab al-Kene – the latter was a Somali and the former a Kenyan Arab.

The four-day siege of the Westgate left at least 67 people dead. On this occasion at least half the militants are believed to have escaped. Eleven people were arrested at the Jomo Kenyatta Airport but it was unclear if they were involved in the Westgate attack. The head of the Kenyan Police Criminal Investigation Department later said five were being held over the attack.

On 5 October, US Special Forces attempted to grab Abdulkadir Mohamed Abdulkadir, a Kenyan al-Shabaab

commander known as “Ikrima”. In Somalia, Ikrima’s role is the recruitment of foreign fighters for al-Shabaab. He has also been linked to Ms Samantha Lewthwaite, the British widow of Germaine Lindsey who was one of four suicide bombers who attacked the London transport system on 7 July 2005.

While Ikrima escaped, US Special Forces did seize Nazih Abdul-Hamed al-Ruqai, alias Abu Anas al-Liby, in Libya. He stands accused of being involved in the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that left more than 200 people dead. Ever since these terror attacks and the Kenyan military intervention in Somalia several years ago, the Kenyan government has feared militants would stage a similar attack.

Meanwhile, back in London, the 28 and 29-year-old suspects were subsequently released without charge. The other two men appeared in Westminster Magistrates court; one dubbed “AB” was charged under Section 5 of the Terrorism Act 2006, which deals with the preparation of terrorism and the second “CD” was charged with an offence contrary to the Identity Documents Act 2010. Both were charged under section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 – which relates to the possession of terrorist information. Another victory for law and order, but only because they were already on the Security Services’ radar. It can only be hoped that the Mumbai menace never comes to the streets of London as it has done in Kabul and Nairobi. Vigilance, as ever, remains the name of the counter-terrorism game.

Bringing the roof down: parts of Nairobi’s Westgate shopping centre were destroyed during the siege

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