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Learning from the Lessons of the 2008 Mumbai Terrorist Attacks

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By now, every law enforcement leader in the country is familiar with the November 26, 2008, attacks on Mumbai, India. The New York City Police Department; the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have all provided comprehensive briefings to assist state and local law enforcement.

In December 2009, a joint team representing the Las Vegas, Nevada, Metropolitan Police Department and the Los Angeles, California, Police Department visited Mumbai to gain a municipal law enforcement perspective of the 2008 attacks against that city. Collectively, the group represented several specialized functions including command, counterterrorism, intelligence, fusion center, and special weapons and tactics (SWAT) staff. The objective was to complement and enhance the understanding of the attack from a local government perspective, not to duplicate or interfere with the role of the FBI to investigate and prosecute the case. The team wanted to gain firsthand knowledge by walking the ground, interviewing the first responders and commanders, and seeing what changes the Indian security forces had made in the year following the assault. Furthermore, the hope was to provide information and stimulate discussion that would allow U.S. state and local governments to better prepare for the possibility of a "Mumbai-style" attack in their respective jurisdictions.

The U.S. Department of State–Mumbai Regional Security Office provided invaluable previsit planning and extensive on-site logistical support and secured invitations from the Indian government and the Indian Police Services. This support proved to be absolutely critical to the success of the trip.

The Political and Cultural Context



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Mumbai is no stranger to massive acts of terrorism. Since 2000, there have been numerous bombings, including the largest postmillennium bombing occurring on July 11, 2006, when more than 200 people were killed and 700 injured when several bomb blasts ripped through railroad trains. As a tribute to Indian resilience and perseverance, the rail lines were cleared and service reopened before midnight that same day.¹

It would be easy to dismiss the success of the terrorists as a result of the fact that the Indian police are poorly armed. While this was and to a lesser degree is still true today, there are a number of political, cultural, and procedural challenges that contributed to the challenges faced by the police. With a population density 10 times that of New York City, Mumbai is a city of contrasts. The center of Indian commerce and entertainment, more than half of the population lives in the slums, which constitute only 6 percent of the land mass. According to the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, almost 22,000 people are compressed into one square kilometer.²

Despite this teeming sea of humanity, violent crime is quite rare. Not surprisingly, however, riots and incidents of civil disorder erupt rather frequently.

The first thing a U.S. law enforcement officer notices when working with Indian police officers is the British influence on the organization and policing culture. The majority of Indian police are lightly armed—most carry a four-foot long bamboo *lathi* baton as their only weapon. Very few carry portable radios or even handcuffs. Even fewer Indian police officers carry firearms—only those being reserved for specialized or military units assigned to internal security do. While American law enforcement officers deal with violent crime routinely, most Indian police officers will never have occasion to make such an arrest in the entirety of their careers. As a consequence, responding to a “shots fired” call is extraordinarily rare for an Indian police officer, yet these officers responded valiantly during the attacks, engaging the enemy with older model pistols and bolt-action rifles.



There were organizational challenges as well. The patrol ranks of the Mumbai police are staffed by employees of the city of Mumbai. The command and executive ranks, however, are staffed by officers of the Indian National Police, headquartered in New Delhi, almost 700 miles away. This challenge was further amplified by the cultural constraint of strict obedience to orders. With a bifurcated chain of command and an unwillingness to act independently and without direct approval from superiors, the Mumbai police appeared to be debilitated by the swift-moving and heavily armed attackers.

Some of these challenges are also shared by American law enforcement, and we should not so easily associate the success of the terrorists with the inadequacies of the Mumbai police. Most American law enforcement agencies have no experience in dealing with multiple teams of militarily trained offenders armed with automatic weapons, hand grenades, and homemade bombs. Nor are they equipped to handle an influx of 1,300 emergency calls in a three-hour period, as occurred in Mumbai. Similar to India, the United States has several layers of government (federal, state, and local), in addition to international authorities, which would have to coordinate. It is very likely that U.S. law enforcement would have to overcome similar confusion and miscommunication during the first hours of such an attack.

Target Selection

In the years following 9/11, many terrorist attacks have been launched against tourism destinations and the hospitality industry, notably Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt; Bali and Jakarta, Indonesia; Islamabad, Pakistan; and Mumbai. While attacks against the hardened targets of the aviation industry have generally failed, attacks against the soft targets of hotels and tourist landmarks have often exceeded our enemy's wildest expectations. Security is, after all, antagonistic to hospitality.

The Taj Mahal and the Trident-Oberoi hotels typify Western influence in the Indian subcontinent. Both are five-star hotels that cater to Western business travelers, as well as the wealthy in their leisure pursuits; both groups being highly prized targets of the enemy. Osama bin Laden has been vocal in his desire to destroy Western economies, and crippling business travel and the tourism industry would certainly accomplish this objective. The Leopold Café, a well-known haven for Western travelers—primarily European visitors and expatriates—was also likely chosen for this reason and to minimize the collateral casualties of fellow Muslims.

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If terrorists want to cause many fatalities and casualties with limited ammunition, they seek a place where the density of humans is the greatest, minimizing the likelihood of a missed shot. There are few places on earth with a greater population density than the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST) railway station in Mumbai during rush hour (see figure 1). During evening rush hour at the CST, tens of thousands of people pack into the lobby. In the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008, it was not difficult for two terrorists to hit their targets when they fired randomly into the crowd and calmly marched through the terminus, meeting little resistance from the underarmed police officers. A few officers were able to return fire from their bolt-action rifles, which forced the terrorists to retreat outside toward Cama Hospital.³

It was originally thought that Cama Hospital was selected as a target because it is where the wounded were taken for treatment. After our visit, we agreed that it was likely a target of opportunity rather than a target by design. The Cama Hospital (see figure 2) is a modest maternity hospital, and not a busy trauma or emergency center. As the attackers fled from the CST, they ran across a pedestrian bridge that exits directly in front of the hospital. Seizing this opportunity, they opened fire, but few casualties resulted.

Another attack site, the Chabad (formerly Nariman) House, was specially selected as a target due to the intense hatred of all things Jewish or Israeli by the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is ideologically aligned with Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda.

There were other nontargeted locations of violence during this particular series of terrorist attacks. The attackers fired randomly as they fled from location to location, from the CST and from the Leopold Café to the Taj Mahal. More importantly, at least two of the attack teams left backpacks containing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in taxis as they disembarked at their particular attack site. As the taxis drove off, the IEDs, set to detonate by mechanical timers, exploded at different parts of the city. An unprecedented 1,365 calls were received to the Mumbai Central Police Operations between 9:30 p.m. and 2:00 a.m.⁴ The wide dispersion of the violence caused by the taxi explosions, six separate targets, and the carnage caused by the moving gunmen caused police officials to believe that the city was under attack by a much larger terrorist group. In fact, it was just 10 young men with a bold plan.

Lessons Learned

- The tourism destinations and the hospitality industry continue to be attractive and vulnerable targets to terrorists.
- Venues with a high human density are especially attractive targets, as they allow terrorists to be economical and efficient by maximizing the number of casualties with a limited amount of ammunition.
- Easily available, light weaponry can cause more casualties than explosives that are difficult to obtain or manufacture for the right target under the right circumstances.
- Choosing landmark and iconic targets will guarantee media coverage—an objective of all terrorist groups. As terrorism and transportation security expert Brian Michael Jenkins has frequently remarked, “Terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead.”⁵

Preoperational Terrorist Activities

Prior to 9/11, the U.S. state and local law enforcement had little understanding of what activities terrorists engaged in while planning a terrorist attack. Law enforcement professionals knew a lot about how burglars, thieves, and robbers “cased” a location and how violent predators identified and selected their victims. But their only understanding of how terrorists operated came from Hollywood. In the years following 9/11, state and local law enforcement has learned a lot about terrorism—the information gained from interrogations and other documentary evidence passed from the intelligence community to the cops on the street. The very comprehensive investigation conducted by the Indian law enforcement authorities assisted by the FBI provides some important facts relevant to state and local law enforcement.



Figure 1. Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station

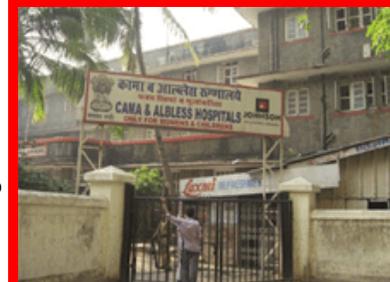


Figure 2. Cama Hospital

The attackers had never been to Mumbai, yet they were able to confidently move about on foot and by stolen car as if they knew the area well. This is possible, but only with significant preoperational planning. The FBI investigation and prosecution revealed that David Headley, a U.S. citizen, engaged in extensive surveillance of the potential targets in Mumbai.⁶

The Chabad (formerly Nariman) house is so obscure that Mumbai cab drivers have difficulty finding the place. Yet the foreign terrorists found their way from the seaside landing area to the Chabad house on foot. Because of the compactness of the area and the poor signage that is indistinguishable in the dark, the route planning may have been accomplished by counting paces as Headley or one of his associates walked the route (see figure 3).

The need for extensive preoperational planning by terrorists provides state and local law enforcement with a rare opportunity to detect them each time they engage in surveillance or reconnaissance. This way, they are exposed to observation and detection by observant citizens or police officers on the beat. If this information is reported to those who can analyze patterns of suspicious behavior, prevention and interdiction activities can result.

Lessons Learned

- State and local law enforcement can learn much from the U.S. intelligence community as it relates to the modus operandi and preoperational activities of terrorists, just as we have by studying traditional criminal activities for decades.
- Unlike traditional criminals, the terrorists engaging in the preoperational surveillance and reconnaissance will probably not be the ones who actually conduct the attack.
- In the twenty-first century, Internet video streaming and live camera feeds eliminate the need to have operatives on-site to conduct surveillance and reconnaissance. Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani American who attempted the May 1, 2010, Times Square car bombing in New York City, claimed to have conducted surveillance of Times Square over the Internet from his home in Connecticut. Areas in any jurisdiction could be exposed to viewers, including would-be terrorists via the Internet.



Figure 3. Chabad house

Taking Hostages

If a goal of all terrorists groups is to gain worldwide attention to their efforts—after all “terrorism is theatre”⁷—the surest way to accomplish this is to take hostages. If one is an Islamic terrorist, the hostages are generally either Israeli or Jewish. If these terrorists want to guarantee 24-hour media coverage, they take children as their hostages. The Mumbai attackers took Jewish children as hostages with their parents and demanded to speak with the media in exchange for the release of the hostages. By doing so, they achieved exactly what every terrorist wants: nonstop global news coverage.

In the post-Columbine United States, once an active shooter makes contact with authorities and begins the negotiation process, nearly all American law enforcement agencies will cease the active shooter tactical engagement and fall back to the contain and negotiate strategy. In Mumbai, this served to further delay the government’s counterattack, while allowing the terrorists to continue with their media strategy. Taking foreign citizens as hostages adds to the complexity and the delicacy of the situation by involving diplomats and other foreign services. Negotiating with terrorists is particularly troublesome. The cornerstone of successful hostage negotiation is the compelling desire on the part of the hostage taker to live. If the hostage taker is committed to dying rather than surrendering alive, the negotiator is distinctly disadvantaged.

A corollary benefit to the terrorists of the nonstop news media coverage is the use of the media as intelligence sources. In the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the terrorists inside of the Chabad house were receiving information from their handlers in real time as they watched television coverage of Indian commandos rappelling onto the roof, allowing them to prepare for the counterassault.

Lessons Learned

- Taking hostages allowed the Mumbai attackers to delay the police counterattack while fortifying their position in the Chabad house.
- Taking hostages provided the motivation for media outlets to show continuous coverage of the event, helping to achieve the greatest audience while simultaneously offering the terrorists a rich source of intelligence.
- State and local law enforcement leaders will be faced with relentless pressure from the worldwide news media, coupled with the difficulties of negotiating with hostage takers committed to dying.

Fire as a Weapon, High Ground for Tactical Advantage

The most provocative and enduring image of the Mumbai attacks is one of smoke and flames pouring out of the historic and iconic Taj Mahal hotel with the Gate of India in the foreground. These striking images, as well as the video footage, were used by the press to fuel the nonstop media coverage of the event. Knowing that persons were trapped inside of the burning building while public safety stood helplessly outside amplified the tragedy and contributed to the perception that the Indian government was failing to protect those inside. Since one of the strategic goals of all terrorists is to garner as large an audience as possible, law enforcement should assume that terrorists will continue to employ the use of fire as a means of achieving this strategic goal.

The Taj is a dominating structure: 11 stories tall with 570 rooms. The interior of the original section is architecturally open and the room doors lead to walkways around an enclosed inner courtyard. The center dome contains a floating circular staircase. For the attackers, this layout allowed them to retreat upwards from security forces that were moving to engage them and easily fire automatic weapons and throw grenades down upon them.

Each time the security forces were able to gain ground, the attackers merely retreated up, setting fires in their wake. This tactic created distance and separation from the pursuing security forces. American firefighters and emergency medical personnel are not equipped or trained to fight fires in combat conditions. The Mumbai Fire Brigade did the best they could from the exterior, but, ultimately, lives were lost as the result. Since as many lives were lost due to fire and fire-related injuries in the Taj Mahal hotel as from firearms (the manager of the Taj Mahal lost his entire family due to fire and smoke inhalation), the terrorists could possibly conclude that fire is an effective and efficient weapon.

Lessons Learned

- Fire is an efficient, easily portable, and cost-effective weapon for causing multiple casualties.
- Most fire and emergency medical services are ill prepared to fight fires and deliver medical aid in active combat environments, providing a strategic and tactical advantage to terrorists.
- Cross-training and properly equipping local police, fire, and emergency medical personnel is the only way to neutralize this advantage.

More Questions than Answers

The intent of the LAPD/LVMPD contingent was not to reexamine the attack on Mumbai from an investigative/prosecutorial viewpoint or an intelligence collection perspective, fully recognizing the primary role of the FBI and the U.S. intelligence community in this regard. The objective was to look at the event from a uniquely local perspective and ask questions of their Indian counterparts as these American officers seek to better prepare U.S. communities for the possibility of a similar type of attack. Members of the contingent asked questions that a state or local cop would. They talked to firefighters before they left so they could ask questions that were relevant to firefighters. They spoke to representatives of the private sector, particularly the hospitality industry: the one sector most frequently targeted by terrorists. As they sought to find answers, what they found were more questions. To effectively learn from the lessons of Mumbai, police leaders must ask themselves these questions:

- How effectively can your agency's personnel observe, record, collect, process, interpret, and share suspicious preoperational terrorist activity?
- How efficiently could your communications (9-1-1) center process the volume of phone calls, and what is the realistic communication and interaction between police, fire, and emergency medical services (EMS) under these circumstances?
- How does your communications center relay real-time tactical information to your intelligence/fusion center?
- How will your intelligence/fusion center relay actionable intelligence to the field commanders from police, fire, and EMS?
- What response capability do you have from a regional perspective? Does your current response protocol involve only SWAT/tactical teams? Does your multiagency response protocol involve multiple venues in a coordinated attack?

- How will the fire and emergency medical services react when facing an armed threat as well as active fires and wounded victims?

In the years following 1999, law enforcement leaders were forced to reevaluate the prevailing doctrine of "contain and call SWAT." Subsequent to the tragedy at Columbine High School,⁸ police have responded to several similar "active shooter" events and applied the new doctrine of immediate engagement and neutralization of the attacker.

Presently, public safety leaders are challenged with a new, more complex dynamic. The typical active shooter is a lone offender or part of a small group, poorly trained and poorly disciplined. The enemy that state and local law enforcement must prepare for now is militarily trained, highly disciplined, and unyieldingly determined. While communities seek to remediate weaknesses, terrorists are plotting to replicate their successes. As terrorists seek to assemble small teams of well-armed attackers and prepare to conduct coordinated attacks against communities, law enforcement officers must ask themselves: Are they prepared to transition from crime fighters to war fighters?■

Notes:

¹ "Mumbai Bombers 'Will Never Win,'" *BBC News*, July 12, 2006.

² Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, <http://www.mmrdamumbai.org> (accessed December 27, 2010).

³ For more information about the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008, see "Wave of Terror Attacks Strikes India's Mumbai, Killing at Least 82," *FoxNews.com*, Wednesday, November 26, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,457885,00.html> (accessed December 20, 2010).

⁴ V. Balachandran, "Dealing with the Aftermath of Attacks" (paper presented at the Pluscarden Programme Conference on 'The Future of International Cooperation in Countering Violent Extremism' at Oxford University in October 2010), n. 10, reprinted in *The Sunday Guardian*, December 16, 2010, <http://sunday-guardian.com/a/1368> (accessed December 20, 2010).

⁵ Gavin Cameron, "Nuclear Terrorism: Weapons for Sale or Theft?" *eJournal USA* (March 2005), <http://www.america.gov/st/peacesec-english/2005/March/20080815122156XJyrreP0.8970606.html> (accessed December 20, 2010).

⁶ Carrie Johnson, "U.S. Citizen David Coleman Headley Admits Role in Mumbai Attacks," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/18/AR2010031805407.html> (accessed December 20, 2010).

⁷ Brian Michael Jenkins, "International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict," in *International Terrorism and World Security*, ed. David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf (London: Croom Helm, 1975), 16.

⁸ For more information about the shootings at Columbine High School, see Tom Kenworthy and Joel Achenbach, "Terror and Tears: Inside Columbine High," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1999, A1, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/daily/april99/scene21.htm> (accessed December 20, 2010).



Photographs by members of the Las Vegas, Nevada, Police Department and the Los Angeles, California, Police Department

Please cite as:

Tom Monahan and Mark Stainbrook, "Learning from the Lessons of the 2008 Mumbai Terrorists Attacks," *The Police Chief* 78 (February 2011): 24–32.

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The official publication of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.
The online version of the Police Chief Magazine is possible through a grant from the IACP Foundation. To learn more about the IACP Foundation, [click here](#).

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