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OCCASIONAL
P A P E R



Understanding Why Terrorist Operations Succeed or Fail

Brian A. Jackson, David R. Frelinger



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Project supported by a RAND Investment in People and Ideas

This Occasional Paper results from the RAND Corporation's continuing program of self-initiated research. Support for such research is provided, in part, by the generosity of RAND's donors and by the fees earned on client-funded research.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jackson, Brian A.

Understanding why terrorist operations succeed or fail / Brian A. Jackson, David R. Frelinger.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8330-4767-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Terrorism—Psychological aspects.
2. Terrorists—Attitudes.
3. Terrorism—Planning.
4. Terrorism—Prevention. I. Frelinger, Dave. II. Title.

HV6431.J2838 2009

363.325—dc22

2009029748

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Published 2009 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
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Summary

Understanding why terrorist attacks succeed and fail is important for homeland security and counterterrorism planning. In examining past terrorist attacks, this understanding is necessary to discern why attackers sometimes are very successful and why sometimes even reasonably well-planned operations fall apart. Discerning ways to make attacks less likely to succeed is a central goal of efforts ranging from homeland security technology development to the direct military engagement of terrorist groups. Given the importance of the issue, many analysts have approached the problem from a variety of different directions. Success and failure in the context of terrorist attacks have been defined in different ways, from the strategic down to the tactical level. Many factors that make contributions to operations going well or poorly have been identified.

But in our work focusing on security planning, we have found the results of many of these past analytic efforts difficult to apply. In part, this is because of the tactical focus of such planning, but it is also because of the absence of a unifying framework that brings together the range of factors that can influence the success and failure of terrorist operations in a practical and applicable way. Based on past research examining a variety of terrorist groups and security planning problems, we have developed just such a unifying framework. At the heart of our model lies our contention that the past success or failure of a terrorist operation—or the likelihood that a future attack will succeed—can be best understood by thinking about the match or mismatch between three key sets of characteristics:

- terrorist group capabilities and resources
- the requirements of the operation it attempted or is planning to attempt
- the relevance and reliability of security countermeasures.

For a terrorist attack to have the greatest chance of success, there needs to be (1) a match between its capabilities and resources and the operational requirements of the attack it is seeking to carry out and (2) a mismatch of security countermeasures and intelligence/investigative efforts with both the group and its plans.

Previous studies of why terrorist operations may succeed or fail include a variety of specific examples of factors that fall into each of these three classes, but in considering how such factors shape the outcomes of attacks, we argue that analysis and threat assessment should focus on the match or mismatch between factors rather than on the factors themselves:

- First, organizing thinking in this manner gets beyond analyzing factors in isolation to focus on key relationships, and in many cases, it is the nature of the relationship—rather than the absolute values of any of the factors—that truly contributes to a terrorist attack

going as its authors planned. This is important for developing accurate threat assessment because focusing on the factors rather than relationships could lead to either artificially high or low assessments of the threat posed by a group.

- Second, focusing on these sets of matches and mismatches provides a more systematic way of thinking about how different classes of security measures align or do not align to different types of threats. The search for certain mismatches between protective measures and possible attack operations is traditional vulnerability-based threat assessment, but combining thinking about how a specific attack team might or might not overmatch a guard force of known capability with how well passive measures do or do not match those same threats provides a more integrated approach to protective planning.

Similarly, looking at how security efforts either do or do not align with groups of varied characteristics is a different way of thinking about surveillance or intelligence planning. While being prepared to capitalize on group operational security mistakes is important, considering how changes in security measures might create new matches that benefit the defense is a more proactive strategy. For example, if changes in the security around a high-profile target sufficiently increase the operational security requirements for pre-attack surveillance, that mismatch may mean future attackers will be forced to attack without enough information to stage a consequential operation.

- Third, identifying mismatches between a group's capabilities and what is known about its intentions may also provide clues to security organizations as to what activities to watch for in the future. A significant mismatch (if it has been recognized by the group) would suggest the need for more pre-attack preparation on the terrorists' part to reduce the shortfall, potentially creating additional opportunities to detect and disrupt their activities. The more a group stays within its comfort zone and only seeks to stage operations that are well within its capabilities, the less pre-attack preparation would likely be required and the quicker it could stage operations; therefore, there would likely be fewer opportunities for intervention.

In these potential differences among groups—between groups seeking to carry out operations well within their capabilities versus those that are reaching beyond what they can currently achieve—we see as an additional reason to draw a distinction between characteristics (e.g., a group's operational skills) and the processes that can affect them when considering why operations succeed and fail. Beyond just avoiding the potential for double counting during an analysis of why an operation might succeed or fail, mixing the two could result in intelligence efforts missing an opportunity (e.g., recognizing the need for particular types of training by a group and therefore focusing attention on detecting it) or underestimating the threat posed by a group that has not been observed carrying out a process that it does not, in fact, need to stage successful future attacks.

These strengths lead us to conclude that focusing attention on a small set of practical relationships in this manner—how different characteristics do or do not match one another—could help to guide analysis of why past terrorist operations went as they did, and, more importantly, could help to identify opportunities to shape the chance of success or failure of future operations.