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The Threat of a Mumbai-Style Terrorist Attack in the United States

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RAND Office of External Affairs

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The RAND Corporation

The Threat of a Mumbai-Style Terrorist Attack in the United States²

**Before the Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
House of Representatives**

June 12, 2013

I regret that circumstances prevent me from testifying in person at this hearing. I want thank Chairman King, with whom I have had long conversations on terrorism issues, Ranking Member Higgins, and members of the committee for inviting me to submit this written testimony. The topic before the committee is the threat of a terrorist attack in the United States along the lines of the 2008 terrorist assault on the city of Mumbai, where 10 terrorists, armed with assault rifles, pistols, grenades, and improvised explosives, carried out coordinated attacks across the city, killing 162 people and paralyzing a metropolis of 14 million people for 60 hours while mesmerizing the world's media.

To provide background on this inquiry, I invite members of the committee to read an early RAND analysis of the Mumbai attack,³ as well as my testimony before the Senate Homeland Security Committee on the subject.⁴

My RAND colleague Jonah Blank has focused his testimony on the current threat posed by Lashkar-e-Taiba, the organization responsible for the Mumbai attack. Therefore I will focus my attention on the attack scenario.

It is ironic that as I am preparing this testimony, neighboring streets in Santa Monica, California, are blocked off because of a shooting rampage by a heavily armed lone gunman who killed five people and wounded four others before being killed by police. Insofar as we know now, political motives were not involved in this incident, but the occurrence of such episodes in the United

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT391.html>.

³ Angel Rabasa et al., *The Lessons of Mumbai*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, OP-249-RC, 2009.

⁴ Brian Michael Jenkins, *Terrorists Can Think Strategically: Lessons Learned from the Mumbai Attacks*, Testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, United States Senate, January 28, 2009.

States demonstrates the possibilities of similar terrorist assaults and at the same time has resulted in police being better prepared to respond to what are referred to as “active shooter” situations.

The Mumbai assault was a complex operation involving five teams of two gunmen each. They arrived together at a seaside village in Mumbai and then deployed to attack various targets across the city. The assault required detailed planning and thorough reconnaissance of the targets, including learning the layouts of the luxury hotels that were the attackers’ final objective. Team members had been carefully selected and trained for months—their skills showed in their disciplined fire control. Each man carried an assault rifle with a large quantity of ammunition, a semi-automatic pistol, and hand grenades. Their goal was to kill as many people as possible at iconic sites. In addition, the group had five improvised explosive devices. The terrorists attacked unguarded targets—the central train station, a hospital, a Jewish social center, a restaurant, and two hotels. During the assault itself, they received instructions from controllers in Pakistan who were watching the episode on television.

Ample Precedents

Although the Mumbai assault was audacious and unprecedented in its scale, complexity, and consequences, the annals of terrorism provide ample precedents for armed assaults, going all the way back to the 1972 terrorist attack at Tel Aviv’s airport. The attack, which came to be known as the Lod Airport massacre, was carried out by the Japanese Red Army, acting for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, with whom the Japanese group had become allies. Three attackers, armed with automatic weapons and hand grenades, opened fire on passengers disembarking from a flight arriving from the United States. Twenty-five people were killed in the assault, and 80 were wounded. More-recent terrorist assaults include⁵

- 1985: The Abu Nidal organization carried out simultaneous armed assaults at the Vienna and Rome airports, killing a total of 19 and wounding 140.
- 1997: Six gunmen attacked tourists in Luxor, Egypt, killing 62.
- 2001: Six gunman opened fire on a church in Bahawalpur, Pakistan, killing 15.
- 2001: Five gunmen attacked India’s Parliament House, killing seven.

⁵ These are strictly armed assaults. Additional assaults that also involved vehicle bombs are not included.

- 2002: Jihadist gunmen attacked the American consulate in Calcutta, India, killing five.
- 2003: Four gunmen attacked multiple targets in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, killing six.
- 2003: Gunmen attacked foreign housing compounds in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, killing 22.
- 2004: Five armed attackers broke through the gates of the American consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, killing five.
- 2004: A large group of gunmen assaulted a school complex in Beslan, Russia, killing and barricading themselves with hostages, most of them children. The episode, the most spectacular event listed here, lasted nearly three days and resulted in 380 deaths.

Terrorist Assaults Since the Mumbai Attack

Spectacular armed terrorist assaults have been made subsequent to the Mumbai attack, although none of them match the scale of that operation:

- 2009: Members of the Pakistan Taliban attacked the Pakistani Army's General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, killing six.
- 2011: A lone gunman opened fire on the American embassy in Sarajevo, Bosnia, wounding one.
- 2011: Pakistan Taliban gunmen attacked and waged a 16-hour gun battle at the naval air base in Karachi, Pakistan, killing 12.
- 2011: Motivated by anti-Muslim sentiments, Anders Breivik detonated a bomb in Oslo, killing eight, and then proceeded to gun down people at a nearby youth camp, killing 69.
- 2011: A jihadist gunman opened fire on a bus carrying U.S. military personnel at Frankfurt Airport in Germany, killing two.
- 2012: A lone gunman, inspired by jihadist ideology, carried out a series of shootings in Toulouse and Montauban, France, killing seven and wounding five.

- 2012: A heavily armed group of reportedly as many as 150 men attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, killing four, including the American ambassador, and wounding 10.
- 2013: Terrorists claiming allegiance to al Qaeda carried out a major assault at Amenas, Algeria, killing 37.

Potential Mumbai-Style Attacks in the United States

The Mumbai attackers infiltrated the city from a hijacked fishing vessel. There are two ways a Mumbai-style attack could be carried out in the United States. First, terrorist planners could assemble and train a team of attackers abroad and attempt to infiltrate them into the United States individually over a period of time or as a single team. None of the major jihadist groups have attempted (or, insofar as we know, contemplated) large-scale armed assaults in the West.

In the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda managed to infiltrate 19 attackers into the United States who remained committed to their suicidal mission even after months of residence here. However, al Qaeda at that time operated in a more permissive environment and was able to draw upon a large reservoir of volunteers at its training camps in Afghanistan enabling it to select the best candidates. The terrorist organization also was better able to clandestinely communicate and transfer funds. Improved intelligence worldwide has since degraded the operational capabilities of al Qaeda and has made its operating environment more hostile, making more likely that authorities would learn of preparations for a large-scale terrorist operation, but there is no guarantee that such a feat cannot be repeated, especially if the terrorists are allowed space to freely plan and prepare attacks.

India's government accused Pakistani authorities of being complicit in the Mumbai attack, but Pakistan has different rules for dealing with India than for other nations. Defendants in three of the jihadist cases in the United States since 9/11 had connections to Lashkar-e-Taiba, but they were not plotting to carry out attacks in the United States.⁶ A major terrorist attack on the United States that could be traced back to Lashkar-e-Taiba or any other Pakistan-based group obviously would have serious consequences for Pakistan.

⁶These include the 2003 Northern Virginia cluster case, the 2005 New York defendants case, and the 2009 David Headley case. For a detailed chronology of jihadist plots in the United States, see Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States since 9/11*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, OP-343-RC, 2011.

The second approach would be for homegrown terrorists to plot a Mumbai-style attack. Today's al Qaeda has become far more decentralized, far more dependent on its affiliates and allies and on its ability to inspire homegrown terrorists to carry out attacks on its behalf. Although still dedicated to spectacular, "strategic" attacks, al Qaeda has embraced a do-it-yourself strategy. Online jihadist publications have exhorted terrorists to carry out bombings, shootings, stabbings, even ramming cars into crowds.

In response to these calls, individual jihadist terrorists carried out shooting attacks, and more recently, stabbing attacks have taken place in Woolwich, England, and on the outskirts of Paris.

The U.S. Experience

The United States is not immune to such attacks. In preparing Congressional testimony on this topic, one cannot-help but recall the 1954 armed assault on Congress itself by four Puerto Rican separatists, in which five members of Congress were wounded. Capitol security has increased since then.

All of the more recent terrorist shootings in the United States have involved a single shooter:

- 1994: A heavily armed Lebanese immigrant opened fire on a van carrying Jewish students on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, killing one and wounding three.
- 1997: A Palestinian nationalist opened fire on spectators on the observation deck of New York's Empire State Building, killing one and wounding six.
- 2002: An Egyptian limousine driver shot and killed two persons at the El Al ticket counter in the Los Angeles Airport. (Although the attacker was labeled a terrorist, his precise motives, beyond killing Jews, were not apparent.)
- 2009: Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad (aka Carlos Bledsoe) shot and killed one soldier and wounded another at an Army recruiting office in Little Rock, Arkansas.
- 2009: Motivated by white supremacist beliefs, a man opened fire at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, killing one person.
- 2009: Major Nidal Hasan shot and killed 13 of his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas; 31 others were wounded in the attack.

- 2012: An army veteran linked to white supremacist groups opened fire on members of a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing six and wounding four.
- 2013: During their escape, following the Boston Marathon bombing, the Tsarnaev brothers engaged in a running gun battle with police in which the older brother was killed and one officer was wounded. (The Tsarnaevs had earlier killed one police officer.)

Al Qaeda's efforts to radicalize and recruit homegrown terrorists have thus far yielded only a meager turnout. Between 9/11 and the end of 2012, 204 persons were arrested or self-identified for providing material support to al Qaeda and allied groups, including Lashkar-e-Taiba; joining jihadist fronts abroad; or plotting to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States. Most of the plots involved improvised explosive devices, but six involved planned armed assaults, two of which were carried out (Bledsoe and Hasan). These two attacks account for 14 of the 17 fatalities that have resulted from al Qaeda-inspired violence since 9/11.

Sixty-eight of the jihadist terrorist plots uncovered in the United States have involved a single individual. The most ambitious plots involved three to seven attackers. Few of the plotters had any training, although some were former soldiers. Only two of the plots definitely anticipated suicide attacks. None came close to the sophistication, determination, or personal skills demonstrated in the Mumbai attack.

Non-Terrorist Shooting Rampages

Mass shootings are not uncommon in the United States, and this appears to be a growing problem since 2000. The following were some of the bloodier incidents:

- 1999: Two teenagers, armed with shotguns, a rifle, and handguns, killed 12 classmates and wounded 24 others at a high school in Columbine, Colorado. They had planned to kill hundreds. This is a rare case in which there was more than one shooter.
- 2007: A lone gunman at Virginia Tech killed 32.
- 2009: A lone gunman in Kinston, Alabama, killed 10.
- 2009: A lone gunman killed 13 in Binghamton, New York.

- 2012: A lone gunman killed 12 at a theater in Aurora, Colorado.
- 2012: A lone gunman killed 26 at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.

The perpetrators in almost all of these cases would be described as at least temporarily mentally disturbed, which speaks to their determination. Nonetheless, they demonstrate that one person, with little or no training, can acquire and effectively use firearms to achieve high body counts. In the above cases, seven armed individuals killed a total of 105 persons, or an average of 15 per attacker, which is close to the results achieved in the Mumbai attack.

The challenge of carrying out a Mumbai-style massacre is not providing individual firepower but, rather, assembling the attacking force. The 10 terrorists who carried out the Mumbai attack were no doubt selected from a larger pool and trained for months. The objective of the training was not simply to instruct them in the operation of their weapons; equally important was selecting the attackers and mentally preparing them for a suicide mission—in other words, duplicating the will displayed in the homicidal rages of crazed shooters.

Since members of the attacking team at Mumbai were trained individually, the lone survivor was unable to tell authorities if any candidates for the operation were deselected because they exhibited insufficient zeal. That would be a limiting factor in any homegrown plot where there is no possibility of selecting volunteers from a larger pool. It is not simply a matter of getting 10 men together; it is necessary to persuade every single one of them to remain committed. Faintheartedness would reduce the size of the group and would also risk exposure of the operation. The Mumbai attack worked because a larger organization was in charge of it.

The cases listed above are not typical of active-shooter incidents in the United States. Overall, the average number of deaths per attack is three; the more-accurate median number is two. Typically, the perpetrator is a male whose motives are retaliation for some perceived personal wrong or simply unknown. Forty percent of the perpetrators ended the attack with suicide; 46 percent of the attacks ended with bystanders or police forcefully subduing the shooter; only 14 percent ended with voluntary surrender. To end the killing, therefore, requires prompt, forceful intervention. Eight percent of the shooters were killed by law enforcement.

American Law Enforcement Is Better Prepared

Analysis of the Mumbai attack shows that local police were poorly trained and equipped to handle such an incident, and the national response also had flaws. In contrast, police in the United

States are better prepared and have gained experience as result of dealing with domestic shooting incidents, which have been carefully analyzed. The Mumbai attack itself provided further impetus for preparations. This does not mean that a Mumbai-style attack could not occur in the United States or that casualties would be prevented. It does mean that police would intervene more promptly to rapidly resolve the episode. A terrorist shooter would be confronted by a heavily armed response, already on the scene in many venues. For example, a hypothetical terrorist shooter that chose a venue like New York's Penn Station would immediately face armed officers from the NYPD, MTA, PATH, NJRR, and Amtrak, and at times, TSA Viper teams and National Guardsmen.

In 1975, fleeing IRA terrorists in London ran into an apartment building, where they barricaded themselves with hostages, thereby initiating a lengthy siege. Imagine what would have happened had the fleeing Tsaernev brothers done the same. In Mumbai, the attackers' seizure of hostages, or the mere presence of potential hostages or victims in the hotels, posed a challenge to the counterterrorist responders. This also constrained authorities dealing with some of the other terrorist assaults.

Barricade-and-hostage situations were a more common terrorist tactic in the 1970s than they are now, and they would complicate the response to a terrorist assault. The United States has experience here. In 1977, 12 members of an extremist Muslim sect, led by an individual with a history of mental illness, seized 149 hostages at three separate locations in Washington, D.C., initiating a siege that lasted 39 hours. The event became known as the Hanafi siege. Two persons were killed during the initial takeover, but patient negotiations resulted in the peaceful surrender of the attackers without further bloodshed. Political extremism has become more violent since then, and a bloodier version of the Hanafi siege could occur.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief survey of history?

- A Mumbai-style attack is conceivable in the United States, although probably not one at anywhere near the scale of the 2008 assault in India.
- In the terrorists' current operating environment, it would be difficult to export a 10-man assault team from Pakistan or another location in the Middle East, North Africa, or South Asia. The jihadist terrorist enterprise has not been able to launch a significant terrorist operation in the West since 2005.

- It is hard to imagine that a terrorist attack on the scale of the Mumbai attack that was traced back to Pakistan or any other country would not result in serious consequences for that country's government.
- There is at present no known terrorist group in the United States that has the organization and human resources to assemble an operation of the complexity and scale of the Mumbai attack.
- Smaller-scale armed assaults have been contemplated by homegrown terrorists, although these plans have been immature.
- The most likely Mumbai-style scenario would involve one to several shooters, who could produce significant casualties. The Oslo attack underscores the killing capacity of one determined individual.
- American law enforcement is much better prepared than local police in Mumbai to respond to active shooter scenarios.
- An armed assault combined with hostages at multiple locations would present the greatest challenge.