

The Threat of Terrorism to U.S. Schools.....Fact or Fiction?

There are presently several professional speakers making their way throughout the California law enforcement training circuit professing the immediate threat Islamic terrorists pose to U.S. school children. Intense, high energy speakers like (Ret.) Army Lt. Col. Dave Grossman convey this message: not only is this threat possible, it is highly likely (Grossman 2006).

Police administrators attending these presentations are given graphic, detailed accounts of school related terrorist attacks in other counties, as well as the speaker's belief this type of terrorism is likely to occur in the U.S. The attendees are often left with a dilemma of what now to do with this information. Do they take the word of this expert and dedicate the time and resources necessary to address a threat that has never before occurred in this county? Do they consider the information a source of intelligence and do nothing further, or do they fully investigate the validity of this issue, recognizing the potential this threat has for being the worst act of violence this country has ever seen?

This article will discuss previous school terrorism acts committed by Islamic extremists in Israel and Russia, as well as evidence supporting the likelihood of a similar act occurring in the United States. It will also explore the preparedness level of California law enforcement. The goal will be to provide the reader with a factual foundation on which he or she can intelligently assess and respond to this threat.

Historical View

For most Americans, terrorism became a reality on September 11, 2001. Prior to the World Trade Center bombing the thought of Islamic extremists killing thousands of Americans on U.S. soil seemed inconceivable. Even though at that time, and in previous decades, scores of terrorist acts were being committed in other countries, the majority of Americans naïvely didn't think it could happen here. Terrorism was someone else's problem.

The following case studies will outline the alarming trend of Islamic terrorist attacks in Russia, designed to capture large groups of hostages (1000+), lasting several days and ending with the murder of hundreds of victims, many of which are children. As well as the terrorist attacks in Israel targeting school and commuter buses transporting children. By looking at these violent acts against children we may better understand the vulnerabilities of our school children here in the United States.

Israel - The citizens of Israel have experienced the terror of Islamic extremists killing their children more than any other nation. They have been under a continuous fear of attack for more than thirty-years. From 1968 to 2004, Israel has had fifteen acts of terrorism committed against school children; killing 92 and injuring 281. Of the fifteen acts, ten were to school and commuter buses transporting students (Dorn p.37).

One of the most tragic and devastating terrorist acts in Israel was the Ma'alot school massacre in 1974, in which 21 Israeli children were murdered by Arab terrorists dressed as Israeli soldiers. As a result of this one incident, Israelis forever changed their way of life. Today, as well as for the past thirty-years Israel has had armed security

forces in every school, armed guards on every field trip and sporting events, as well as armed security on buses (Grossman 2006).

After the 1974 Ma' alot school massacre and Israel's unprecedented police /military response at school sites, no successful terrorist acts against school children occurred until 1997, some 23 years later. Interestingly, during this same time, terrorist attacks in Israel caused 791 deaths according to the Israeli Foreign Ministry. It would appear Israel's decision to make their schools hardened targets contributed to the terrorist's decision not to attack schools for some 23 years.

In 1997, terrorist attacks targeting school children reemerged. The terrorists changed tactics, though, almost exclusively targeting school children traveling on school or commuter buses. Even though armed forces accompanied these buses, they still presented themselves an easier target than a fortified school. From March, 1997 to June, 2004, ten of the twelve recorded terrorist acts against school children involved school or commuter buses (Dorn p.38). Why exactly these Islamic extremists decided to re-launch the attack against children is unclear, but one reason could be the absolute feeling of fear, panic and helplessness this cowardly act causes a community.

Russia- Terrorist acts against school children are not exclusive to Israel. Russia has also suffered greatly from this type of terrorism. The September 1, 2004, massacre at Middle School No.1 in Beslan, North Ossetia, Russia, is the worst terrorist act against school children in world history. The three-day siege left 330 dead, including 172 children and 700 wounded. Russian Military Police Special Forces suffered a loss of 21 elite soldiers and 31 terrorists were killed in the battle for the school. This brutal and

barbaric act of violence against children, women, and the elderly shocked the conscious of even most battle-hardened soldiers and law enforcement officials (Giduck p.172).

According to Russian experts, the Beslan Siege was designed by the Chechen terrorists to last several days, to end with a high body count of mostly children, and receive world-wide news media coverage. Once the terrorists gained control of the school there was nothing the Russian government could have done to prevent hostages from being killed. A quicker response by Special Forces may have saved more lives, but hostages were going to die. This type of terror and reality is something for which law enforcement in the United States is not prepared (Giduck p.174).

The Chechen terrorist responsible for Beslan also took credit for the 2002, Nord-Ost theater attack in Russia that left 129 hostages dead, of which many were children. These terrorists chose a theatrical production with a cast of many children. The Nord-Ost attack was the first Islamic terrorist act involving nearly 1000 hostages and many believe it was a harbinger for the siege at Beslan (Giduck pp. 83,171).

Although the attacks in Russia and Israel were all carried out by Islamic extremists, they differed greatly in their methodology. Both types of attack present specific tactical and logistical challenges that are new law enforcement agencies in California and the rest of the Country (Dorn p.39).

How valid is the threat?

The terrorist attacks in Russia committed by Chechen Muslim extremists should be of great interest to the United States. For decades, Chechens have been fighting side-by-side with the Taliban and al Qaeda combat veterans. They have been trained in al-Qaeda training camps, as well as by the United States and the CIA, during the 1990-

Soviet -Afghanistan War. Additionally, during Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 and 2002, Chechens were seen in Afghanistan helping the Taliban against American and Northern Alliance forces (Giduck pp. 54, 55).

According to a November 2004 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report, Osama Bin Laden had been actively involved in the terrorist insurgency in Chechnya since before the end of the first Chechen war (1991). The report also indicated Bin Laden was responsible for setting up several terrorist training camps in Chechnya. It is also known that two of Bin Laden personal bodyguards were Chechen. This information supports what Russia has always contended; that a link to al Qaeda has existed for years (Giduck pp. 57, 408).

During October and December of 2001, just months after 9-11, Osama Bin Laden gave statements to the Al- Jezeera News Network condemning the deaths of innocent Muslim children in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Chechnya, blaming the United States. He noted that Americans killed innocent children in Pakistan and mentioned the deliberate murder of one million Iraqi children, personally blaming President George H. Bush. Bin Laden stated it was permissible for Muslims to kill the innocent children of those that have done the same. He also reaffirmed his idea of striking the American economy by every means possible and mentions the slaughter of Muslim children in Chechnya one year before the Nord-Ost attack and three years before Beslan (Clarrey 2006).

On September 24, 2001, less than two weeks after the World Trade Center bombing, a Chechen resident was captured during a special anti-terrorism raid. The raid uncovered written plans for airplane strikes on the World Trade Center towers in his

possession. The plan, which had the word *Jihad* written on the cover, outlined the seizing of the very commercial aircraft that had been used in the twin towers bombing (Giduck p.87).

During November 2004, FBI officials released information that a computer disc found in Iraq contained American school floor plans, photos and other information of six U.S. schools. This was the same week the U.S. Department of Education advised school leaders nationwide of the Beslan Siege. The downloaded data, found by U.S. military soldiers during a terrorist raid in July 2004, included a recommended crisis response report. The schools involved were in San Diego, Ca.; Fort Myers, Fla.; Jones County, Ga.; Birch Run, Mich.; and Franklinville and Rumson, both in New Jersey. U.S. government officials down played this information saying there was no real evidence of a specific threat to a school (MSNBC, 2004).

Another compelling source of evidence came from Lieutenant John Kost of the Sarasota County, Florida Sheriff's Department. During a 2004 lecture titled "Inside the Terrorist Mind"; Lt. Kost explained his role with the Homeland Security Anti-Terrorism Task Force and disclosed how the Al-Qaeda terrorists responsible for 9-11, received their flight training in his jurisdiction. Lt. Kost was involved in hundreds of post 9-11 follow-up interviews concerning the involved terrorists, as well as having knowledge of the interrogations of at least twenty suspected Al-Qaeda terrorist detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Lt. Kost said a common thread between the prisoners when they were separately interrogated was their admission of a plan to attack our schools and children. He further explained this plan consisted of simultaneously attacking 8-12 soft targets, including schools throughout the United States (Kost 2004).

This information has not gone unnoticed by the Department of Homeland Security, which released three alerts regarding school buses and the possible heightened states of danger. Additionally, Federal agencies like the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the National Association of Pupil Transportation (NAPT) began focusing on the possibility of school bus terrorism as early as 2001. The lack of state or federal mandates requiring adequate training, however, has resulted in a disjointed effort across the country. California was one of only six states that either released a training video or implemented a training program for school bus drivers on terrorism preparedness (C. Dorn 2005). Although this is a positive step, much remains to be done.

Preparedness level

To prepare for a situation like Beslan, law enforcement would need to thoroughly understand the mindset, capabilities and intentions of the terrorists behind these attacks. During the Nord-Ost Theater assault, Russian Special Forces deployed a gas into the theater, rendering all the terrorists and hostages unconscious. The soldiers then entered the building and shot every suspected terrorist in the head while they appeared to be sleeping. This tactic was used because of the possibility of suspects being wired with explosives (suicide bombers) (Giduck p. 82). Is this something that U.S. law enforcement is prepared to do, either tactically or psychologically?

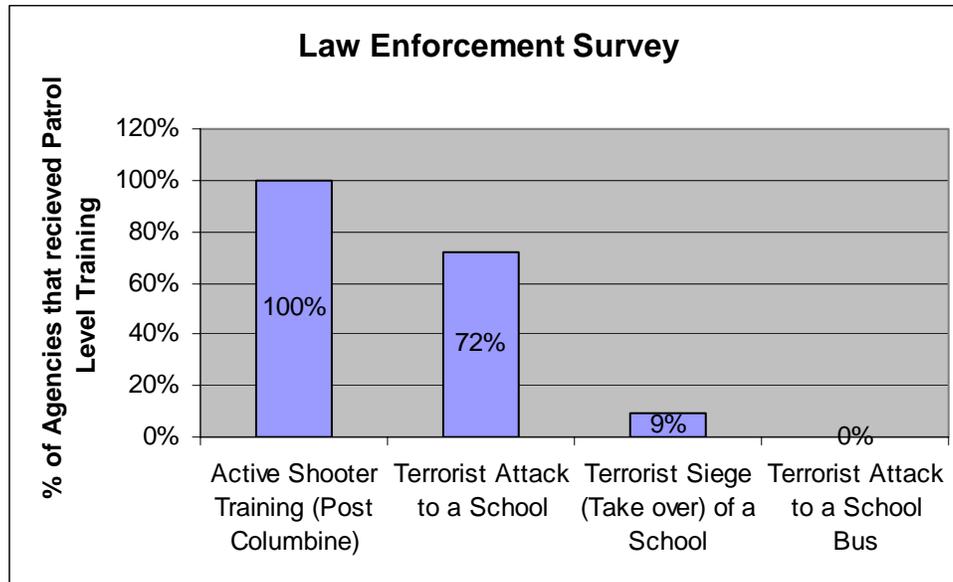


Table 1-1

A survey conducted by the author of more than fifty law enforcement agencies, representing various size departments throughout California, reported that over 70 % received patrol level training to address a terrorist attack to a school. However, less than 10% of the agencies surveyed reported receiving training to address a terrorist siege (take-over) of a school. And none of the surveyed agencies reported receiving patrol level training to address a terrorist attack to a school bus. Even though school bus attacks have previously occurred in this country, the threat of Islamic terrorists targeting children on school buses, appears is being overlooked (Baray 2006).

Interestingly, the 70 % of the surveyed agencies reported receiving training to address a terrorist attack to a school were referring to “active shooter” training they received in response to the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado. Although this response may seem applicable for terrorist assaults, more in-depth training would be required to adequately prepare law enforcement officers to respond to a Beslan Siege type assault (Giduck p.82).

Awareness

Local law enforcement agencies will be held accountable by their citizenry if children become the target of terrorism. Days after the Beslan Siege, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed his nation and admitted Russian law enforcement's "Failure to recognize the complexity and danger of processes going on in our country and the world as a whole," and "to react to them adequately." We should not overlook this rare public criticism by President Putin, who described perfectly what they failed to do. They were not *aware* of the threat surrounding them, which is the same threat now surrounding the U.S. (Giduck p.233).

Extending on the findings of school threat awareness in California, it appears the majority of law enforcement agencies in this country are not aware of the seriousness of the issue. Although many police departments have trained to respond to a threat of suspects who are immediately causing death and serious injury to others, it does not directly address the barbaric nature of the large-scale terrorist attack on our children (Giduck p. 174, Grossman 2006).

The complexity of this issue is far more reaching than just the tactical concerns. To effectively prepare and respond to this threat, police chiefs and their executive staff would first have to be made aware of the issue in its entirety, determine its level of priority and commit to a course of action. The most critical areas that should be considered when developing a strategic plan to address this issue are as follows:

- The development of a police department employees to be the agencies subject matter experts regarding school terrorism (Terrorist Liaison Officer)
- Collaborative partnership with the school district and community stakeholders

- A successful school resource officer (SRO) program
- A comprehensive prevention and emergency response plan
- Anti-terrorism tactical training for patrol level and SWAT personnel.

Training Available

The Orange County, California Sheriff's Department has developed a training course to address many of these concerns. The 40-hour course, titled "*Terrorism Liaison Officers: Role in School / Community Networking*" outlines the terrorism threats in this country, the importance of effective community partnerships and strategies, and the development of a comprehensive prevention and response plan for a variety of potential threats (Dyball 2007). Also addressed during the 40 hour course was the importance of the school resource officer (SRO) in establishing the needed partnership between the school district and police department, as well as being the first line of defense. This message was also conveyed during a 2004 Executive Management Symposium on Community & School Safety in Palm Springs, California, by (Ret.) Lt. Col. Dave Grossman.

During Mr. Grossman's lecture, titled "The Real Threat of Terrorism to our Schools," he explained the threat our country is facing, and the importance of the SRO position. Grossman posed the question to the audience, "If our children are this country's most precious asset, then why don't we have our best officers protecting them?" The audience of mostly police managers agreed that the SRO position was not being viewed in this manner and in several police agencies the position was viewed as an undesirable assignment that needed to be filled by inverse seniority. The point was made if our school children became the victim of terrorism, the view of the SRO position would change.

Grossman suggested having SWAT officers as SRO's, and attaching a sense of honor and duty to their assignment (Grossman 2004, Dyball 2007).

The development of a comprehensive plan by school officials and law enforcement preparing communities for all emergencies and disasters, including a terrorist attack to a school will require partnerships between the police department and school district at all levels. A result of this collaboration would be law enforcement working with schools, conducting tactical site surveys, giving recommendations on the placement of school surveillance camera systems and providing schools training for lock down and evacuation drills.

The aforementioned TLO training course devoted several hours to this topic and recommended the all hazards approach plan to safe school planning be utilized. The Book "Jane's Safe Schools Planning Guide for All Hazards" (www.janes.com) was used as a reference guide. This book supports the concepts outlined in the 2003 U.S. Department of Education's most comprehensive guide titled; *Practical Information on Crisis planning: a Guide for Schools and Communities* (www.ed.gov/emergencyplan/) and provides much greater depth and detail, while fully addressing the four phases of emergency management: Mitigation/prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery (Dorn p.85).

The TLO would also be responsible to share this information with key stakeholders in the community, such as the school district, school transportation department, parent / teacher association (PTA), city manager, elected city council members, community groups, and elected school district board members. This would be

a new role for most law enforcement agencies. The purpose would be to share the information and establish on going partnerships with open lines of communication.

As for law enforcement agencies receiving the needed tactical training to address this issue, this is an obstacle yet to overcome. Currently, there is not a POST (Police Officers Standard and Training) certified anti-terrorism tactical training course available. This was recently addressed at the Second Annual Los Angeles Joint Regional Intelligence Conference on April 12-13 of this year. Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca acknowledged this issue, announcing the approval of a new law enforcement anti-terrorism police training academy, which will be built at the former Los Alamitos Army Reserve Base in Orange Country, California. The anticipated completion date was not disclosed (Baca 2007). In the meantime, law enforcement will need to seek alternative training sources. One option is the use of “Archangel Group”, a non profit anti-terrorism consulting/training organization that works directly with United States law enforcement, military, and government agencies (www.antiterrorconsultants.org).

The Murrieta Experience

The implementation of a strategic plan as discussed in this article is an ongoing endeavor. The Murrieta Police Department in Riverside County CA committed to this effort in 2004. Although much progress has been made, there is still much work to be done. The previously mentioned lecture by (Ret.) Lt. Col. Dave Grossman was a starting point in this decision process. Once a commitment was made by the chief of police to make this issue a priority the following changes and ideas were implemented:

The agency first changed the perception of the SRO position, adopting the philosophy of Grossman, by attaching a sense of honor and duty to the assignment. The

SRO's have been re-assigned from Patrol to Investigations and now work closely with the gang and street-level drug detectives. The new SRO concept and commitment was then shared with the Murrieta Valley Unified School District. The Police Department provided training to School administrators on drugs, gangs and other related topics and conveyed Grossman's message. The response by school administrators and educators was outstanding, monthly meetings were established by a new task force known as G.R.I.P. (Gang, Risk, Intervention and Prevention). The task force includes school administrators, educators, campus supervisors, SRO's, police sergeants and a lieutenant.

Another example of this collaboration is a "Home to School" program. This program, which is an extension of the police volunteer system, uses members of the PTA (Parent teacher association), who have cleared a police background check to monitor the surrounding streets of schools sites. Armed with a cell phone and a notepad, their mission is to watch for anyone or anything suspicious, as children walk to and from school. The program, which has been operational for the past two years, was started in response to the attempted abduction of a child near a school. This program is an excellent resource for law enforcement to gather information of suspicious activity near schools.

Murrieta PD has also worked closely with the school district conducting site surveys and the placement of new digital surveillance cameras. Several high quality cameras have been strategically placed on school property, near major intersections to record the license plates of vehicles. The police department is able to access these images via the internet at anytime.

Another effort that is in progress, is the installation of a direct 911 phone lines from school sites to the Police Dispatch Center that can be activated by strategically

placed panic alarm buttons. In theory, once the button is activated, an immediate 911 call is placed from the school. The Dispatch Center will then receive the call with a pre-recorded message advising of an active shooter incident. Also, a pre-determined text message will appear on the dispatchers monitor screen indicating the emergency and listing contact persons and cell phone numbers. The use of this system will reduce confusion and ensure immediate contact and response by the police department.

. Although much has been accomplished towards implementing a strategic plan, there are still several challenges to be addressed. The process has been time consuming and a learning experience for all involved. We are planning a tactical training class for line level police officers to execute the response plans that are practiced by police and school administrators.

Conclusion

This article has examined the horrific terrorist acts committed against school children in Russia and Israel, evidence supporting the likelihood of such acts occurring in the U.S., and the preparedness level of law enforcement to address this issue. One community in California, like many others, has been working to prepare for the unthinkable. The foundation of facts to assess the potential threat is one that should compel any police executive to come to a similar conclusion. Given this information, the question remains: what now should a police administrator do with this information?

It should be clear there is no quick fix, three-day seminar, or book that can be bought and put on a shelf to prepare a police agency for this threat. It will take time, resources, dedication and a shared vision by the entire community to appropriately address this issue. However, once a police administrator is made aware of this threat in

its entirety, is there really any other responsible option other than to understand the issue, recognize its potential and prepare for the unthinkable?

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