

Car Bomb: from Belfast to Baghdad

ISE blogs.lse.ac.uk/waronterror/2012/03/04/car-bomb-from-belfast-to-baghdad/

Posted by AD Brown

Belfast on 21st July 1972 will always be remembered as a black day for those covering the history of the troubles in Northern Ireland, for it is the day that the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) set a precedent which even today is the curse of all urban conflict: The deadly car bomb.

Twenty-two car bombs in the space of eight minutes, nearly 400 kilograms of explosives used, between 30 and 70 minute warnings given, and nine people die with 130 civilians injured.

Kill a leader. Defy a government. Blow up the peace.

The use of remote car bombs are still a phenomenon which conflicts around the world have failed to overcome, and with good reason. All that it requires is roads, and traffic. Wherever we need to go, whatever place we need to stop, be it a place of work or a busy airport or train station; there is always that street or road we can't escape.

And twenty-first century conflict has been synonymous with car bombs; they are the pedestrian's worst nightmare, the terrorist's best weapon. They can bring civilian life to a near halt, they can cause unprecedented economic damage, and they can take a whole city hostage.

In urban conflict they are free from limitations: no trenches no bases; just roads and streets.

It was their export into the Middle East by the 1980's that really put the phenomenon on a new pedestal. Embassies, government buildings, religious seminaries, Police Stations and even shopping centres — were not spared. All that was required was perpetrators, speed and audacity.

Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Tel-Aviv and even Tehran; the car bomb was the enemy one had to fight. Thousands were killed and many more injured, sometimes horrifically.

Even the events of 9/11 coupled with the sporadic use of suicide-car bombers has failed to impact the use of the crude and remote device.

In post-Saddam Iraq, nearly 200 people have been killed this year already by use of the car bomb. The events of just over three weeks ago in predominantly Shiite districts of the capital Baghdad, say it all.

Thirteen people were killed and 62 injured when four car bombs exploded in quick succession, all aimed in and around areas which were rife with civilians going about their daily lives.

This was the latest in a string of hundreds of car bombing that country has faced ever since the American invasion to topple former tyrant Saddam Hussein.

It is in this climate that any premonition of an endgame to the car bomb phenomenon is seen as futile. The brutal truck bombing that killed five times Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri in 2005 spoke volumes; Hariri always drove in an entourage of bullet and bomb-proof vehicles fitted with V6 security mechanisms — the highest possible in the world.

But other countermeasures to defend against the crude weapon have been evolving over time.



You only have to take a saunter around some of the major places of interest in Dubai, Tel-Aviv or even Riyadh to see the colourful use of concrete blocks, bollards, metal barriers and the hardening of vulnerable buildings to withstand the immediate impact of an explosion.

In addition, roads that lead to or pass a major public building or vulnerable place of congregation are now either being either restricted to walking only, or are being closed outright as a security precaution. The idea is obviously to deter potential bombers from targeting sensitive sites, although these types of measures have been attributed to terrorists attacking so-called 'soft' or unprotected targets.

However it's difficult to assess the productiveness of such countermeasures in countries like Iraq, where in order to foil the potential for car bombings; virtual lockdowns of whole cities are often ordered

But despite the increased security from capital to capital, car bombs or the threat of them, are still very much alive. In 2010, glimpses of this crude practice were prevalent in different places around the globe. On May 1st, a young Pakistani terrorists attempt to explode his bomb-laden vehicle in the middle of New York's Time Square was thwarted by two street vendors. If it had succeeded, 100 kg of high explosives would have wreaked havoc to one of the busiest, and frequented, places in the world.

In August 2010, a renegade Irish republican exploded a 200lb device outside a Police Station in Northern Ireland. Although several businesses were damaged in the vicinity of the target, miraculously no one was killed or injured.

In October, two car bombs exploded during celebrations marking Nigeria's 50th Independence Day, killing 10 people.

In November 2010, a Somali-American student was arrested in an FBI sting operation after attempted to set of what he ostensibly thought was a car bomb at a Christmas tree lighting in the state of Portland, Oregon.

The potential for car bombings continuing could not be more transparent. Despite technological countermeasures, increase public awareness, more affective training for security personnel to both identify and combat them and their telltale signs being increased, it's clear a lot more work needs to be undertaken.

The capitals of the Middle East, some of them basking in the glorious sunshine of financial benefits from huge oil reserves and which are now booming with real-estate, free trade and tourism developments; are obviously taking security precautions seriously. This explains the propping up of some of the most advanced counter-terror and anti-car bomb measures being placed, the threat is always prevalent and these states are determined to deny the possibility of them going off.

But if one can extrapolate anything from last years events in North America to the Middle East, there is an inescapable conclusion: car bombs are going to be with us for some time yet.

Mohammad I. Aslam is a Ph.D. candidate in political science in the Department of Middle-East & Mediterranean Studies and a teaching assistant in the Department of Theology & Religion, King's College London.