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The 7 August 1998 African Embassy Bombings

The Good News

- Long before bin Laden came to public attention he and his group were a well-known threat and the subject of significant attention: We were definitely NOT “blindsided” by a new threat
- Much was known about al Qaeda and its cells and operations prior to the embassy bombings
- Specifically, Al Qaeda was known to have a global reach and anti-American hatreds which made them a potential threat to any and all U.S. installations overseas
- Much had already been done to limit their effectiveness (disruption) and to preclude specific attacks
- In fact, the existence of the East African al Qaeda cell was known
- Many members of al Qaeda in East Africa had been identified
- Al Qaeda operatives in East Africa were under intense scrutiny
- There had also been informant warnings about their activities in the region
- In response, there were active and ongoing surveillance, threat evaluation, and disruption operations
- The East African cell was feeling the heat of this scrutiny and felt themselves to be “at 100% danger”
- It was believed that this campaign of disruption had done much to dissipate the threat, and it is likely that it had
- In retrospect, there were also specific indications of a bomb plot
- Embassy personnel in Nairobi acted on the threat warnings by making improvements to security and by notifying Washington that they felt vulnerable
- More than one team from the States visited Nairobi in order to evaluate the threat and to re-examine the vulnerabilities
- The attackers were not successful in getting as close to either embassy structure as they had sought
- The attacks were not very successful in killing Americans (the intended targets): Most deaths were among innocent Kenyans in the building next to the Nairobi embassy (which collapsed)
- Several other planned bombings of U.S. installations had successfully been prevented (e.g., in Albania)
- In fact, the number of success stories (bombings prevented) far exceeds the number of failures (bombings that were not prevented)
- The attacks resulted in an escalation of the already-massive campaign to expose bin Laden, to build a legal case against him, to destroy his terrorist network, and to prevent future attacks; a campaign which has already had some success and which is likely to continue to bear fruit in the future
- Spurred on by the attacks, we were very quick to identify the perpetrators and to apprehend a number of them
- The large number of embassy closings since the bombings would seem to indicate that we are now more willing to accept some loss of productivity in response to false alarms as a tradeoff for minimizing the risk to our personnel

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The Bad News

- In retrospect, it appears that we may have underestimated the threat (or overestimated the success of the disruption campaign that was targeted against the threat)
- Because the U.S. embassy in Sudan had been closed in response to the threat level there, and because the Sudanese embassy personnel had been moved to Nairobi, perhaps we should have anticipated a higher level of threat to the Nairobi embassy than we did (and have placed it higher on the priority list for improvements in the areas of security and physical protection)
- The signs of a bombing plot did not add up to as clear an indication of target and intent as might be surmised after the fact
- Much of the early warning data was from human informants, whose sincerity and motives can be impossible to ascertain
- Furthermore, warning signs came buried in a great deal of background noise (other signs, indications, warnings, and threats) that greatly complicated threat authentication and response prioritization
- For example, many warnings are received by U.S. facilities annually which turn out to be false alarms: this has the effect of instilling a degree of skepticism and caution in examining evidence of new threats
- In retrospect, it seems as if threat assessment personnel in Washington did not take the warning signs as seriously as did the embassy personnel in Nairobi
- The threat elsewhere seemed greater at the time so that, in the perspective gained by looking at the big picture, Nairobi was not high in priority for major improvements
- We cannot close or move installations at every threat: to do so would place control of U.S. installations in the hands of our adversaries
- In retrospect, the targeted embassies were not as well-prepared as they might have been for truck bomb attacks
- However, resource constraints did not allow instant fixes to all vulnerabilities
- Any physical security improvements would have been subject to countermeasures which could have limited their effectiveness (such as larger bombs to offset against greater standoff): there is no perfect security that can definitively prevent the loss of life and no assurance that the requested changes would have prevented an equivalent level of damage and casualties
- The attacks killed many innocent people
- The attacks caused massive property loss
- The attacks imposed significant future costs (both to rebuild locally and to upgrade security worldwide)
- The attacks generated enormous publicity for bin Laden and raised him to the level of a worldwide icon for frustrated Muslim fundamentalists



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The bottom Line

- Even though the embassy attacks make America look weak, the many success stories imply that the U.S. capability to combat terrorism is far from feeble
- If the embassy attacks are viewed as one battle in a long war, the overall war is going well for America (even though some losses have been inevitable along the way)
- Because the small size of the total number of American casualties was not as well publicized as the larger number of total casualties, and because the thwarted bombing plots get less attention than the successful ones, the impact of the attacks has been magnified and has fed a perception that we were somehow negligent in prevention and protection
- If we view terrorism as an ongoing war, in which some non-zero level of casualties is unavoidable, then the full sequence of events on and around August 1998 can be viewed as much as a demonstration of our strengths, as a demonstration of our weaknesses

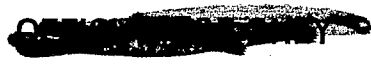
The U.S. State Department Accountability Review Boards have published two very nice analyses of the African embassy bombings. After examining those documents in detail, we have concluded that it is worthwhile to summarize the results of these studies here. What follows is a much-condensed list of the findings and recommendations for the reader who lacks the time to read the DoS reports in their entirety. In these summaries, we have taken the liberty of including some findings and recommendations from the body of the reports which were not actually labeled as findings or recommendations in the reports themselves, and of neglecting some findings and recommendations which were too narrowly focused to be of interest here. Therefore, these lists are less of a straightforward summary than they are a set of the lessons we have gleaned from a reading of the two reports.

DoS Findings

(The findings of the U.S. State Department, "Report of the Accountability Review Boards on the Embassy Bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam on August 7, 1998", January 1999)

- Physical security at the sites generally met or exceeded levels prescribed by the DoS for posts at medium or low threat levels
- However, these standards were insufficient to protect against large vehicular bombs
- Neither embassy building met the DoS standard for a 100 ft setback/standoff zone: Because both were "existing office buildings", occupied before this standard was adopted, a general exception had been made
- The widespread use of such exceptions reflects the reality of funding levels that are inadequate to replace sub-standard buildings rapidly
- Security systems and procedures at both sites were properly implemented
- In Nairobi, the bomber failed to penetrate the embassy's outer perimeter because local guards refused to open the gates
- In Dar es Salaam, the bomber also failed to penetrate the perimeter, stopped by guards and blocked by an embassy water truck

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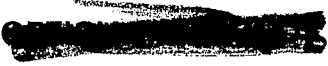


- Neither site's Emergency Action Plan anticipated a car bomb scenario: Therefore, personnel were not trained to react properly and guards did not have adequate equipment
- In general, the DoS has systematically failed to recognize the threat posed by vehicle bombs and to react accordingly
- There has been a collective failure of the U.S. government for a decade to provide adequate resources to reduce the vulnerability of U.S. diplomatic missions to terrorist attacks
- There was no credible intelligence that provided immediate warning of the bombings
- Some intelligence was discounted because of doubts about the sources
- Some intelligence, while taken seriously, was imprecise, changing, and non-specific
- Actions by intelligence and law enforcement authorities to confront and disrupt suspect persons and groups were believed to have dissipated the threat
- Intelligence has allowed the US to thwart a number of similar terrorist threats

DoS Recommendations

(The recommendations of the U.S. State Department, "Report of the Accountability Review Boards on the Embassy Bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam on August 7, 1998", January 1999)

- Provide a "special alarm signal" to warn of large exterior bombs
- Institute duck-and-cover practice drills
- Provide special equipment to perimeter guards to counter vehicular bombs
- Assume that all posts are potential targets of vehicular bombs
- Improve perimeter stand-off
- Improve counter-surveillance
- Close posts for which adequate enhancements cannot be made
- Provide training and equipment, where needed, to local governments and their police forces
- Place more weight on terrorism in the DoS "Composite Threat List"
- Increase the number of posts with full-time Regional Security Officers
- Augment the number of Marine Security Guard Detachments
- Provide Regional Security Officers with training on terrorism, terrorist methods, explosives, etc.
- Reduce the number of embassies by establishing regional embassies
- Review physical security standards on a priority basis
- When building new chancelleries abroad, collocate all U.S. government agencies in the same compound
- Obtain funding for capital building programs
- Clarify responsibilities for security



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- Encourage better coordination among persons with security responsibilities
- Ensure that a single high-ranking officer is accountable for all security matters
- Build public support for increased resources for foreign affairs
- Advise all posts of the threats posed by WMD
- Provide crisis management training for mass casualty and mass destruction incidents
- Establish a revitalized program for on-site crisis management training
- Create and exercise a team and equipment package configured to assist in post-blast crises
- Acquire a modern, reliable, air-refuelable Foreign Emergency Support Team aircraft
- Improve procedures for mobilizing aircraft and aircrews to provide more rapid and effective assistance
- Ensure that all posts have emergency communications, excavation tools, medical supplies, emergency documents, next of kin records, and other necessary equipment at secure off-site locations
- Enhance the flow of intelligence
- Assign a State Department official to the Counter Terrorism Center
- The FBI and DoS should consult on ways to improve information sharing

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