

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

For security directors, tourists, business travelers and expatriates traveling or moving to the Middle East, Islamist jihadist terrorist groups present more security challenges than ever before.

This summer alone, a coordinated attack involving suicide car bombers, suicide bombers on foot, and gunmen killed at least 56 people and injured 75 at a Shi'ite holy site in Baghdad. Four days earlier, two coordinated bomb attacks killed more than 300 people and injured over 220 others a few miles away. At least 40 more were killed and 60 injured in a car bomb attack on a market nearby just before that.

As seen in recent months, these groups no longer confine their activities to the Middle East. In July, a priest's throat was slit and four nuns were taken hostage in a church in Rouen, France. That same week, 15 people were injured when a suicide bomber who had pledged allegiance to ISIS detonated a bomb at a music festival in Ansbach, Germany.

Even in the U.S., Omar Mateen pledged allegiance to ISIS on the phone to police and journalists as he carried out a mass shooting in an Orlando, Florida, nightclub, killing 49 people and injuring 53 others. This was the first ISIS-related attack in the U.S; it certainly won't be the last.

Terror Trends and Lessons Learned

Coordinated attacks such as those described above reveal that these groups are well organized and increasingly sophisticated. They perform reconnaissance and conduct surveillance to understand—and overcome—security controls and evacuation strategies. While the security community has long recognized this potential danger, global headlines confirm the lethal reality.

In addition, both the tactics and the perpetrators are evolving. Publications such as Al Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine are educating sympathizers with detailed information on how to wage jihad against all who oppose their beliefs. Articles describe how to identify potential targets, providing techniques, strategies and other information to facilitate a successful attack with maximum casualties.

Chillingly, these publications also urge followers to wage holy war wherever they are.

And those followers listen, as evidenced by the growing number of individual actors using creative methods to kill Westerners and Western sympathizers. From homemade hand grenades and suicide vests to vehicles filled with explosives, the risk to the public and to security forces continues to grow.

Strategic Steps

Whether you're a security officer responsible for other people's safety, or a tourist or business traveler responsible for your own, the following steps are critical to mitigating these threats.

Plan in advance. Travelers, expatriates, and the people responsible for their security should proactively plan any trip or stay. Every movement and action should have a Plan B mapped out in advance, as well as an evacuation strategy in case of crisis. When a threat develops, it will be too late to plan. Security professionals and travelers should consider every potential threat—bombings, shootings, kidnappings, riots—prior to any trip or residency. They should develop contingency plans and evacuation strategies for every eventuality, from the minor (a blocked or closed road along a planned route) to the major (a bombing in a hotel, restaurant, mall or crowded street).

Layer security measures. A well-crafted plan includes multiple levels of security, both proactive and reactive. Surveillance, for example, should be a two-way street: pair surveillance detection with counter surveillance. Physical protection should incorporate countermeasures to mitigate threats at a distance, with increasing circles of security closer to the person(s) being protected.

Understand the culture. Monitoring English-speaking media alone provides only part of the picture. Arabic media will reveal important attitudes and activities that have significant security implications for Westerners. Even social media will vary among English and Arabic-speaking users.

Collect timely intelligence. A lot of information is available from the U.S. State Department's Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), as well as organizations such as ASIS International (the leading global organization for security professionals). These sources can offer in-depth information on the political, social and terrorist threats in every country. However, local intelligence on groups, activities and potential threats in an area are even more important. AT-RISK International, for example, has an office in Dubai and a network of local experts throughout the Middle East, providing information that is both more local and more timely than these regional intelligence briefs.

Remain vigilant. As attacks and attackers become more sophisticated, they also become more difficult to detect. Terrorists who would have once used easily spotted assault weapons now may resort to an explosive vest concealed under a coat or a car bomb, both of which may be almost impossible to detect. The threat trickles down, as well: as high-profile targets become better protected and more difficult to approach, soft targets become more attractive to terrorists. Be hyper aware of your surroundings at all times.

Avoid predictability. While spending more time in an area increases familiarity with the local culture and any security challenges, it also heightens an individual's risk of being targeted. Assume that all movements are being watched, and vary them often. Don't settle into a routine: take different routes; vary the places you go and the times when you go there; leave home, work or a hotel at different times.

The Value of Local Connections

The current, volatile climate in the Middle East requires timely intelligence from a partner with a local presence. An extensive local network of operatives and information sources will provide

intimate knowledge of the region, culture and language. Someone who can proactively monitor and gauge the seriousness of potential threats, as well as manage contingency plans, is a critical resource.

Ultimately, security in the Middle East depends on proactively researching and planning before traveling to or living in the region, not reacting to threats when they occur.

For more information on safety and security in the Middle East, please contact AT-RISK at info@at-riskinternational.com or 1-877-323-2444.