

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

In a June 10 press conference, Rehman Malik, the internal affairs advisor to Pakistan's prime minister, reported that a suicide bombing plot had been thwarted when Pakistani authorities arrested nine individuals and seized four apparent vehicle-borne improvised explosives devices (VBIEDs) containing a total of over 1,100 kilograms of explosives.

Three of the VBIEDs were recovered by authorities on June 6. Of those, two vehicles contained 400 kilograms of explosives, while the third carried a 200-kilogram load, Malik said. On the same day, authorities advised that they were searching for a fourth VBIED, which appears to be the one they recovered June 9. According to Malik, it contained 180 kilograms of explosives.

The VBIED seizures follow the June 2 bombing of the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, which left eight people dead and many more wounded. In his press conference, Malik noted that three would-be suicide bombers were among those arrested. He also noted that the militants' attack plans were "fully mature" and that the group was close to launching attacks with the VBIEDs at the time they were arrested.

Tactically, Malik's assessment rings true, because militant groups do not make VBIEDs unless they intend to use them. Not only is the process expensive and labor-intensive, but it is far easier to cache and conceal bulk explosives than a fully assembled VBIED. Because VBIEDs are so easily discovered, one does not leave them sitting around; they are constructed and then quickly employed. Additionally, if an improvised explosive mixture is to be used as the main explosive charge in the device, many of these mixtures are unstable and tend to degrade over time. They are best used fresh.

With these facts in mind, it is understandable that the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad issued a Warden message after the June 6 seizure alerting U.S. citizens and advising them to maintain a low profile. The fact that the fourth device was seized on June 9 shows that the U.S. concern was justified.

There are several militant actors in Pakistan, ranging from foreign groups like al Qaeda, which claimed credit for the Danish Embassy attack, to domestic actors such as Baitullah Mehsud's militant jihadist group, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

It is not yet clear whether the seizure of the four VBIEDs resulted from the investigation into the Danish Embassy bombing (and is therefore tied to the perpetrators of that attack), or whether the devices belonged to another actor. There is, however, some indication of their provenance based on their size. There are also several other interesting points that can be gleaned by turning a protective intelligence lens on the facts at hand.

Prior Warning

Like many other attacks, the strike against the Danish Embassy did not occur out of the blue. In early 2006, following the September 2005 publication of a series of cartoons satirizing the Prophet Mohammed, protests erupted in many parts of the Islamic world. While many Muslims protested the cartoons by boycotting Danish goods, others displayed their displeasure with violence. The Danish embassies in Beirut and Damascus were set on fire, and threats to Danes abounded in many countries. In August 2007, this outrage was inflamed again when a Swedish newspaper printed a controversial cartoon of the Prophet.

Things came to a boil again in early 2008 when Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders released a controversial film called Fitna, which harshly criticized Islam and used images of the Danish cartoons from 2005. Many Muslims were outraged by the film. Among those who reacted was Osama bin Laden, who in a March 19 statement threatened attacks against European countries. In fact, bin Laden even said the images were more provocative than killing Muslim civilians.

In the wake of these most recent threats, the Danes drew down their embassy staff in Islamabad. Recognizing that their embassy was not very secure, the Danes had many of their remaining Danish staff in Islamabad work out of hotels, which they believed were safer.

The Dutch reacted similarly and actually moved their embassy to an Islamabad hotel in mid-April. In response to the threat, security was also ramped up around European embassies, including Denmark's, which continued to conduct many of its consular functions in its embassy building.

The Target

The Danish Embassy was located in an upscale residential neighborhood outside of Islamabad's protected diplomatic enclave. In fact, the embassy is located not far from Luna Caprese, a restaurant that was bombed on March 15, or the Marriott hotel, which was targeted by a suicide bombing in January 2007. While its location outside the diplomatic enclave made the facility more vulnerable to attack, perhaps the most critical factors in the embassy's vulnerability were its location in relation to the street and its construction.

The Danish Embassy is not only in a residential neighborhood -- it also is a converted residence. As such, it was built accordingly and therefore not constructed of materials meant to withstand the force of an explosive attack. The vulnerability presented by this type of construction was compounded by the fact that the building was situated very close to the street. In a bombing attack, construction is important, but the only thing that truly provides protection from the effects of a very large VBIED is standoff -- keeping the bomb away from the protected building. With newer U.S. Embassy buildings (such as the one in Islamabad), the structures are not only built to withstand a blast or rocket attack, but also located a significant distance from the embassy compound perimeter. This positioning is intended to ensure protection from any blast.

In contrast, the Danish Embassy in Islamabad only had a few feet separating the perimeter wall from the building itself. Due to the building's construction and location, very little could have been done for its protection other than to close the street in front of it or at the very least attempt to control traffic. Many older embassies and consulates are situated in former residences or commercial buildings. As a result, in the realm of embassy security there is often tension between security officers, who want to shut down streets and provide standoff protection for their facilities, and the host government, which does not want further congestion in the typically crowded cities in which they are often located. In the case of the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, which was not located on a main thoroughfare, it appears that the Pakistanis did establish roadblocks to control access to the area, which contained many other potential terrorist targets.

The Attack

The vehicle used in the attack was a small, white Toyota or Suzuki. According to several media reports, the vehicle bore counterfeit Danish diplomatic license plates. The attack was caught on the Embassy's CCTV system which, according to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service, reportedly shows the vehicle passing by the embassy, stopping and then reversing toward the building's vehicle gate before detonating.

The location of the seat of the blast (which marks where the vehicle was when it exploded) in relation to the embassy building and gate appears to confirm this report. In fact, the brunt of the force of the explosion missed the embassy building and instead destroyed a section of the embassy's perimeter wall adjacent to a parking lot. However, a U.N. building located across the street was not as lucky and experienced heavy damage from the explosion.

The fact that the bomber drove past his target would seem to indicate that he was poorly prepared for his mission -- much to the good fortune of the Danes. Had he been able to detonate the device while on the street parallel to the embassy building, or had he been able to jump the curb and position the device directly against the perimeter wall, the damage to the embassy building would have been far worse, and the casualty count might have been higher.

The reports of the counterfeit Danish diplomatic license plates are also intriguing. While such plates likely helped the bomber get past the police checkpoints and onto the street where the embassy was located, the Danish Embassy is very small, and the guards there were undoubtedly familiar with all of the vehicles bearing Danish diplomatic tags. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that they would have allowed the vehicle to enter the embassy's perimeter, enabling the bomber to detonate the device in very close proximity to the building.

The timing of the attack is also very interesting. That it was conducted at 1 p.m. on a business day clearly indicates that the attackers intended to cause maximum casualties. Their efforts were not intended as a symbolic gesture, as might be suggested by, for example, an attack undertaken on a Saturday or at 3 a.m. While these particular aggressors were obviously after blood, their brutal intentions may have had limits. The embassy's visa section closes at noon, and it would appear that the attackers may have purposefully scheduled a later attack to minimize the casualties to Pakistani visa applicants. They also did not schedule the attack

during the morning or afternoon rush, when there would be more people on the street.

While al Qaeda claimed the attack as a success, it killed mostly Pakistani Muslims and clearly did not create the type of "infidel" body count the planners would have hoped for -- the only Danish citizen killed was born in Pakistan and held dual citizenship; the rest of the victims were also Pakistanis.

Recovered VBIEDs

Whoever assembled the four recently seized VBIEDs devoted a significant amount of resources to their creation. From the sheer size of the devices alone, it can be clearly extrapolated that they were intended to create significant carnage and damage. One simply does not make a 400-kilogram VBIED for symbolism. A 5-kilogram device can be used to make a symbolic point -- a 400-kilogram device is immensely destructive. The simultaneous employment of two such devices detonated in one city in conjunction with two other 200-kilogram devices could create a terrorist spectacular.

The size of the devices also speaks to the intended targets. A would-be terrorist does not need a 400-kilogram device to go after a soft target. While a 5-kilogram IED can easily take out a U.S. fast-food franchise, a larger VBIED is needed to damage hardened targets with robust construction. A 400-kilogram device detonated at the same spot as the June 2 attack would likely have leveled the Danish Embassy. By way of reference, such a device would be larger than those used by Hezbollah in Argentina to bomb the Israeli Embassy in 1992 or the Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina in 1994.

Some may contend that the Pakistani government has fabricated this threat and staged these arrests to create public reassurance while demonstrating its competence following the Danish Embassy bombing. Such a publicity stunt is unlikely in our opinion, especially considering the extensive amount of explosives uncovered. In fact, by making this information public and showcasing the large amount of explosives that the attackers were able to obtain, the Pakistani government is illustrating just the opposite point.

In effect, the Pakistanis have confirmed that an at-large organization inside their country possesses the ability to amass and employ nearly 1,200 kilograms of explosives. This news is not reassuring by any stretch of the imagination.

The recovered VBIEDs are evidence of both a serious and a costly effort. Even in Pakistan, 1,200 kilograms of explosives does not grow on trees. An organization willing to expend such effort, resources and time will not typically stop until they are destroyed or otherwise neutralized. They might make tactical changes based on lessons learned from failed operations, but they will continue to attack.

Pakistani militant groups are not shy about using explosives, but the majority of their devices -- even suicide devices -- are smaller. The size of the device and the fact that there were multiple devices involved would tend to point toward al Qaeda, which has a penchant for thinking big and has an operational history of conducting multiple, simultaneous attacks. In other words,

these attacks appear to indicate that Pakistan's jihadist chickens are coming home to roost.

The bombing of the Danish Embassy and the recovery of the four large VBIEDs demonstrate that al Qaeda has the capability to mount serious attacks in Pakistan. The fact that the last four devices were discovered before they could be employed illustrates that the Pakistani government has some intelligence coverage regarding those capabilities.

At this point, however, it appears that al Qaeda, the TTP and other militants can operate with a large degree of freedom and that the Pakistani government does not have the ability to consistently prevent them from planning and launching attacks. From the intent and effort displayed by al Qaeda in the last several days, we anticipate more attempted attacks in Islamabad -- including attacks on hard targets -- in the foreseeable future.

This means that foreigners with interests in Pakistan would be well advised to heed the June 6 Warden message, in spite of the recovery of the fourth VBIED. With militants' targeting plans likely to continue, it would also be prudent to ratchet up surveillance detection efforts at potential target sites.

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