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JORDAN WINS A BATTLE WITH AL QAEDA

In the space of just one day, basing its operations on the best and most timely intelligence available, Jordan's elite counter-terrorism forces were able to prevent the deaths of thousands of its nation's citizens and kill or apprehend the members of two al Qaeda cells operating in that country. Having exclusive access to not only the commander of the unit involved, but also footage of the operation itself and the evidence provided by those terrorist captured alive, JIR can outline in detail how one of the most successful counter-terrorist operations of recent years was executed and what conclusions may be drawn regarding future trends in terrorist methodologies.

Background: a nation like none other

In a global geostrategic environment which some see as pitting the good against the bad, as dividing the world into those that are "with" America or "against" it after the attacks of September 11th 2001, the choices open to Muslim and Arab nations have narrowed. Some, those that fell under the sobriquet: 'rogue nation', have tried to maintain their defiant stance. Given the fate of Afghanistan and then Iraq, this has not been an obviously attractive choice. Other governments have played a different, albeit still risky game. Nations such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have either altered their behaviour to better please the new foreign policy demands made by the White House, or at least made the right noises in terms of rhetorically committing themselves to the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Beyond these two categories there remain a few sui generis countries. The Hasemite Kingdom of Jordan is one of them.

Lying right in the heart of the Middle East, this state of 3.5 million citizens, mostly of Palestinian descent, represents a shining beacon of political modernity allied to a stiff determination not to become a victim of political violence. This is despite efforts by many of its neighbours to destabilise the republic – most notably from the direction of Syria and Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, over recent years, it has become clear that every one of the more significant terror groups of the region have attempted to penetrate its borders and undermine Jordan's security, from the Muslim Brotherhood, to include al Qaeda.

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As a result, for example, the Jordanian Prime Minister was killed at the hands of Black September, unleashing a series of attacks against high-level targets. After having suffered enough at the hands of actors such as Abu Nidal, the decision was taken not to give in to the pressures of the extremists but to redouble proactive efforts to take terrorism head on. Subsequently the national security architecture of the nations was revamped, officials were sent abroad to study existing Western responses to the terrorist threat, and eventually a special counter-terrorism (CT) unit was created. It was this unit, Battalion 71 (Batt. 71) of the Royal Jordanian Special Operations Command that would intercept the al Qaeda cells on April 20th of this year just hours before they were to launch a chemically enhanced triple explosive attack against the citizens of Amman and central elements of the government and security forces.

Lucky arrests: the need for a lightning response

In the early days of April, the Jordanian police intercepted three lorries carrying more than of twenty tonnes of explosive materials and chemicals near the small town of Irbid. On interrogation, the drivers admitted to being part of a larger scheme to execute simultaneous attacks against targets within the capital of Amman. Azmi al Jayousi was identified as the operational head of the two terrorist teams. Within a matter of days, the relevant authorities had information to the effect that Jayousi was establishing a base of operations in the lower-class Marqa district of the capital.

Intelligence already obtained illuminated several important facts. The first was that the interdiction of the lorries and explosives was unlikely to cause Jayousi to give-up and disperse the remaining operatives. Jayousi was committed to reacquiring the necessary capabilities and proceeding with the attacks. The cells involved were well organised and built upon a system of interlocking telephone calls protocols utilising anonymous cell phones acquired on the second-hand market. Therefore, if one cell was intercepted, it would be necessary to move on all the rest before the pre-arranged chain of telephone calls was due to be initiated. This meant that operationally a move could only be made once adequate real-time intelligence was available concerning the whereabouts of all suspects and that once the initial action was taken, it would be imperative to follow up with the rest of the physical interceptions almost immediately. In the end, Batt. 71 was able to apprehend or kill all the operatives within 12 hours of the first shot being fired by the first entry team.

Cell One: takedown

Once satisfactory intelligence had identified the whereabouts of Jayousi's own safehouse, a plan of attack was rapidly drawn and troops deployed. Given the fact that the apartment was located next to a school, the decision was taken to move only under the cover of darkness, when the fewest civilians and children would be in the vicinity of the target. At just after 0200 in the morning, once rear exits had been secured, the frontal entry team announced its presence and demanded the surrender of the apartment's occupants. The reply immediately given was a fusillade of automatic gun



fire injuring a member of the frontal. Forcible entry was thus authorised. Within a matter of seconds troops had entered Jayousi's apartment, killed one of the terrorists and captured the Jayousi along with his wife and children.

In the shaky video footage supplied to JIR which had been taken by one of Batt.71's members, one can clearly make out the conditions inside the safehouse and the capability of the cell and its modus operandi. Strewn all across the apartment are the tools of terror. Piles of detonators and explosives – improvised and commercial –, cash (dollars, Euros and dinars), passports, a lap-top, as well as automatic weapons are dispersed amongst the more innocent articles of a life lived holed up. Additionally the willingness of the terrorists to use women and children as a shield is also apparent from the footage.

Cell Two: more intelligence, a second takedown

During a very rapid and effective interrogation following the initial operation, Jayousi revealed all, including his personal links to al Qaeda, training in Central Asia and the finances acquired from Syria. Most significantly, the authorities now knew that Abu Musab al Zarqawi was personally involved and backed the operations and that the targets were multiple: the highest security HQ compound in Amman within which can be found the Dairat al Mukhabarat, or General Intelligence Department (GID), the Office of the Prime Minister and the US Embassy.

Jayousi was however unable (or unwilling) to give the exact whereabouts of the second cell. The authorities did, nevertheless, now know that every six hours the cells would check with one another. They used this fact to lure a member of the second cell to a public place of their choosing, the Hashemi district of Amman. Seven hours later, in broad daylight they thus successfully arrested the head of the second suicide cell. Incredibly and in a testament to the methods employed by the Jordanians, their new captive immediately identified the location of his own cell's safehouse and the fact that he was expected to check-in by phone within fifteen minutes. The decision to immediately re-deploy and intercept the last group was then made at the highest levels.

The house under question was in a well frequented part of northern Hashemi, again near to a local school. The government decided to evacuate as many residents as possible, starting with the school. By early afternoon this had been achieved and the CT team was ready once more. Again, the authorities announced their presence and attempted a brief negotiation, using religious themes to convince those inside that the Muslim faith precludes the actions they were committed to and that they should reconsider. Yet again, however, the response was violence as those inside opened fire wounding another member of Battalion 71. Tear gas canisters were launched, but the firing continued. With no other option, the troops, armed with the most modern Heckler and Koch G-36 automatic carbines, were ordered to enter the property. Within seconds the three terrorist who would have executed the attack were dead and within minutes personnel from the prosecutor's office and the police were sifting through the apartment for evidence. Fortunately, in this case, there were no unarmed occupants inside the safehouse. Two al Qaeda cells on the cusp of a huge attack had



been stopped with only two members of the authorities wounded. Both would soon be back on duty.

The Attack: customised attack vehicles, chemically enhanced explosives

Having watched videotaped interviews with the surviving terrorists and having access to other evidence, JIR is in a unique position to outline the full details of the attack as planned. Surprisingly, given the scale and audacity of attack planned, the cells managed to achieve all that they did in a matter of mere months. Approximately a quarter of a million dollars was procured for the purchase of several heavy trucks plus diversionary / logistical vehicles and no less than 70 different toxic chemicals. These would be mixed with the more conventional chemicals used to make improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The chemicals would have two distinct effects. The first – as in the case of sulphuric acid - would be to chemically enhance the explosive power of the IEDs, to act as a chemical booster. The second and more deadly additions – nitric acid, acetone, and the rest - would result in the creation, after the explosions, of a huge cloud of toxins that would disperse for approximately 3 miles around the GID compound, inducing blistering and suffocation that it has been estimated could have killed up to 80,000 innocent residents of Amman.

Whilst the possibility to chemically enhance an explosion is not a newly discovered fact (Note: there is evidence available that the first WTC attack of 1993 was meant not only to structurally weaken the twin towers, but also to disperse a cloud of cyanide gas, but the cyanide was burnt off in the initial blast), this would have been the first time that the technique would have been used successfully on such a large scale. The important fact to note here is that unlike other established and militarily weaponised agents, there is no list of existing antidotes for use in the event of such improvised chemical cocktails being dispersed.

Once the 20 tonnes of various chemicals and explosives had been re-acquired, the team found and rented a large garage facility in a desolated area not far from their safehouses. Here once more ingenuity came to the fore. Over a period of weeks, the three lorries were specially customised so as to make them all the more durable and deadly. Given that the GID complex is perhaps one of the most heavily protected compounds in the world, a special approach was needed. Each lorry's bed was altered in such a way that the explosives would be enclosed in a reinforced container that would not only hide the nature of the load being carried, but would also increase the blast effect on detonation. The largest and heaviest vehicle was altered the most. Starting from scratch and based on their own designs, the terrorists built a reinforced steel skirt / blade at the front of the vehicle. As the convoy of trucks approached the main gate of the compound, a lead vehicle, a conventional sedan would open fire on the guard post outside the entrance. Once neutralised, the blade equipped vehicle would smash through the heavy physical barrier and fly on through to position itself against one of the three targets inside, the GID headquarters itself. Once the way was thus cleared, then the last two trucks would easily insert themselves into the compound, position themselves in front of the remaining two targets, the American embassy and the PM's office, and detonate themselves. After the buildings were flattened the cloud of noxious fumes would float freely on the wind through the city



Lesson Learnt: lethality; flexibility; imagination

Representing perhaps the enviable epitome of a successful CT operation against the deadliest of foes, the Amman operation is not without its value in highlighting important characteristics of the modern, religiously motivated terrorist. These observations can be summed up if one understands how violent, flexible and imaginative the cells proved to be.

In their determination to wound or kill tens of thousands, it should be obvious that we are no longer in the age of a terrorism that was famously typified by Brian Jenkins as one in which the terrorist “doesn’t want a lot of people dead; he wants a lot of people watching.” Starting with 9/11, through the Madrid and Beslan attacks and with what we now know about al Qaeda’s plans for Jordan, the game is no longer ‘mass-audience’ but ‘mass-casualty terrorism’. Likewise the willingness of the terrorists to use force before any other option – as highlighted in their repeated violent response to calls for their surrender and their willingness to position themselves next to schools and have family members, children included, live with them - clearly shows an attitude to violence and the irrelevance of innocents that is without parallel.

The ability of the cells to move frequently, maintain communications and redraw plans after the interception of their first load of explosives, similarly demonstrates a great level of operational flexibility. The fact alone that cell phones and numbers were regularly destroyed and changed, demonstrates a very sound appreciation of operational security as well.

Lastly, the lengths to which the team went not only to devise a plan which would hurt thousands and also decapitate the government and its security apparatus, but to heighten lethality in unconventional ways, is astounding. The acquisition of dozens of different chemicals compounds, the physical alteration of attack vehicles and the complexity of the final plan all speak to a very high level of deadly imagination.

WMD: a reappraisal?

Much has been made of the terrorist–WMD nexus. An exaggeration of its operational reality has cost the current White House much credibility with regards to justifying the Iraqi invasion. But perhaps we should reappraise the threat. Based upon documents captured immediately after the storming of Kabul by US forces (most especially the ominous ‘Superbomb’ volumes), it is undoubtedly the case that al Qaeda is very interested in acquiring more and more knowledge concerning nuclear as well as chemical and biological weapons. This is despite what intelligence sources and analysts see as the relatively crude capabilities at the disposal of such groups. But it may be exactly the as yet unsophisticated abilities limiting such organisations that have forced them to turn elsewhere in the search for greater effect and increased lethality. Subsequently it may not be too early to assume that cruder but just as unconventional methods may become more prevalent. Whilst multiple synchronised IED attacks are already a signature trademark of al Qaeda – as in Madrid and the



African embassy bombings – one of Amman’s more disturbing conclusions may be that in the future, having resigned themselves to the difficulty of acquiring classic WMD capacity, the terrorists may further develop and deploy chemically enhanced and toxic explosives. All we can hope is that the security forces of other nations will be as effective as those of Jordan in intercepting terrorist cells before their plans are executed.

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