Suicide terror attack response training

By John Rose

The suspect walks into a school full of young people and begins to shoot indiscriminately, killing and killing until one of two things happens: he is shot and killed by first responders or, as first responders close in, he turns his gun on himself and commits suicide. In both cases, the killer knows that he is going to die at the end of his “mission.” Another suspect walks toward a pizza parlor full of young people with a backpack full of explosives until he is stopped by security or detonates the explosives, killing himself and innocent people. As seen in the active shooter example above, the suspect intends on dying in the end no matter what.

The lesson learned for law enforcement is that in either case, regardless of the motivation or the method, the suspect’s mission is to kill as many innocent people as possible before being stopped or dying at the end of the mission. What this means for law enforcement is that time is on the side of the killer, not the victims or the police. Law enforcement, for the most part, learned this lesson when training for Columbine-type active shooter scenarios. However, as we know all too well, this paradigm shift in tactics came only after several tragic active shooting events. Today some agencies have still failed to train and prepare their personnel for these types of critical incidents. It is also safe to say that very few agencies in the United States are preparing their first responders for suicide bombers/suicide attackers.

This lack of preparation by law enforcement for suicide bombers is troubling. Most counterterrorism experts believe it is only a matter of time before citizens in our country will suffer the devastating effects of suicide bombers. Suicide bombers between 1980 and 2003 made up only three percent of all terror attacks worldwide, but accounted for approximately 48 percent of all fatalities. The lessons learned for both law enforcement and the terrorists is that suicide-bombing attacks are very efficient and effective. The materials required to build and deploy an improvised explosive device are readily available throughout the country and plans to build the devices are just a couple of Web clicks away.

Let’s look at some other similarities from the tactical response of officers to both the active shooter and the suicide bomber. The first responders will have to take action immediately. Setting up a perimeter and calling SWAT will not be viable responses to the suicide attacker. The first responders will have to be prepared to delay first aid to victims while concentrating on neutralizing the threat, to utilize quick reactionary force tactics and to have the skill sets for precision shooting in a chaotic environment full of innocent people. The first responders must also be prepared for multiple suspects and/or secondary improvised explosive devices.
The additional officers responding to the scene in second and third waves will need to understand their roles in setting multiple perimeters to look for accomplices, secondary devices, securing witnesses and evidence and of course the eventual command post. The Israelis refer to this as “rings of security” and they hold regular training exercises with other emergency responders (such as EMS and fire) to ensure that everyone knows their role and that there is an effective and efficient response to the incident.

**The necessary paradigm shift**

What does law enforcement need to do? Start assessing, planning and training for the suicide attacker. Preparation begins with the realization that there needs to be a paradigm shift in most agency’s current firearms and defensive tactics training, just like we experienced post-Columbine. When trainers first started telling veteran officers that they were going to be expected not to wait for SWAT, but to get in and put down the shooter, some were not comfortable with this. The reality is that the patrol officer on the beat will most likely be the one to stop a suicide attacker, and therefore training, equipment and advanced skills are no longer just for the “SWAT guys.”

Law enforcement officers go to training and listen to lectures on theory or some deep background about terrorism, but very often come away asking the question, “Okay, it all makes sense, but what do I do tomorrow?” For this reason, the development of a patrol response to a suicide bomber needs to be part of every agency’s contingency planning. The program should be geared toward the officer on the street by addressing the reality of the situation that he/she may encounter with a suicide attacker.

Training officers should collaborate with their subject-matter experts in special operational tactics, firearms, defensive tactics, counterterrorism, EMS and fire to institute a training program for their officers based on the realistic threats and capabilities of that locality. After collaborating with their partners and assessing their current capabilities, the training officer can then put together modules of training to bring the readiness of their agency where it needs to be to face this threat.

**Five modules of training**

The program may consist of the following modules of training:

1. Training on the history and mindset of suicide bombers, as well as significant case studies that could be realistically duplicated in the jurisdiction of the officers attending.
2. Address a paradigm shift in firearms training to include precision shooting, headshots and shoulder-mounted weapons. Officers should also be exposed to firearms training that take into account the need to create significant distance between the officer and the possible suicide bomber. This “standoff distance” is often very difficult for officers to put into practice because of their trained desire to pursue and apprehend suspects. The problem with that is that the average suicide vest contains 22 pounds of high explosives, and the need for standoff is paramount. This is where your EOD personnel can help.

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to educate the average officer about the level of danger from estimated amounts of explosives.

3. Consider the unique defensive and offensive tactics of officers and security personnel confronting suicide attackers. Many officers trained in current defensive tactics would never go hands-on with a firearm in hand, but this may be necessary with a suicide attacker.

4. Allow officers to put their new knowledge to the test with tabletop exercises and a vulnerability assessment of a possible local target of a terror attack.

5. Conduct a series of scenarios utilizing Simunitions® FX marking rounds or Airsoft, allowing the officers to test their new tactics and skill sets. This final module allows officers to make a self-assessment of their capabilities and limitations.

Once your agency has trained your personnel in suicide bomber response, you should consider drills that include other first responders in your jurisdiction. I always caution that when doing drills with even open-source material, practice OPSEC. There is no need to make it easy for the terrorists to know what we know.

Adapting to change and preparing now

Law enforcement tactics are constantly changing and evolving to deal with the threats to public safety. Prior to the Columbine active shooter incident, the tactic of patrol officers setting a perimeter and calling for SWAT was considered "best practices" in the law enforcement community, but no more. We must realize that law enforcement must evolve in our tactics to deal with suicide bombers, as many experts believe that it is inevitable that America will suffer this scourge of suicide attackers. If we do not prepare now, we will not be able to say to the public that we are sworn to protect that "we had no idea that this could have happened." Therefore, you ask, "What do I do tomorrow?" Start training for the threat of suicide attackers, and pray that you will never need to use it.

Endnote


About the author

John Rose is an associate professor of criminal justice with Walters State College in Tenn., and the coordinator of specialized training for the college’s Regional Law Enforcement Academy. Rose served in law enforcement for more than 18 years with his last rank that of major with the Sullivan County Sheriff’s Office.

Rose is a graduate of the FBI National Academy and has completed numerous counterterrorism courses with DHS. In 2006, he traveled to Israel to study counter terrorism and in 2008, returned to Israel as an academic fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) to study terrorism. Rose holds an MA degree in Criminal Justice and Criminalology from East Tennessee State University, where he is an adjunct professor teaching counterterrorism. Rose can be contacted at JR@hitacllc.com.