CENS INSIGHT

A Review of Global Open Source Intelligence

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Intelligence lessons: defeating terrorism on the front lines

Although there has been a series of well-publicised terrorist attacks over the past decade, many other planned attacks have been thwarted. This paper argues that in order to stop more attacks, governments need to rethink the way they allocate counterterrorism resources.

Despite the recent focus on failures by the intelligence community to detect and prevent acts of terrorism such as the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US or the 7 July 2005 London bombings, law enforcement agencies have in fact had multiple successes in the past 15 years and thousands of lives have been saved. One emerging trend is that many of the failures have occurred at the strategic level, while some of the most significant victories have been at the front lines or at the local level.

By examining intelligence successes and failures, lessons can be learned that will have direct policy implications for future training and resource deployment.

A tolerance for disaster

Strategic intelligence has had a far from spotless record over the last century. Significant failures have included Pearl Harbor, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001. At the strategic level, these failures share a number of distressingly common features: warning information that lacked proper assessment, stovepiping, a deliberate lack of inter-agency co-operation and a bureaucratic overemphasis on process at the expense of operations. Most destructive, however, may be that bureaucrats in the intelligence community are rarely held responsible for their failures. As a result, the most critical part of the intelligence cycle - direction - is often the weakest.

Although changes are currently being made in intelligence and security agencies in the West, they will not solve the problems described above. Most of the changes are cosmetic or simply add another layer of bureaucracy to the existing system. The reforms could even leave Western nations more vulnerable to surprise attacks. This includes the possibility of more 11 September 2001-style attacks or attacks involving weapons of mass destruction. It is more likely, however, that the current series of smaller, uncoordinated attacks such as the 7 July 2005 London bombings and the 11 March 2004 Madrid bombings will continue.

A pessimistic but accurate assessment of strategic analysis was published by Richard Betts in 1978 and republished in 2004. In his article *Analysis, war and decision: why intelligence failures are inevitable*, Betts makes the observation that the best way to be prepared for dealing with intelligence mistakes and decision-making errors is to have a "tolerance for disaster".

Success stories

While intelligence failures inevitably receive more coverage by the media, successes have occurred in the struggle against terrorism. The cases of Ahmed Ressam, who was arrested before a planned bomb attack on Los Angeles International Airport in 1999, and Jamaat al-Fuqra, a terrorist group whose plans to bomb a cinema and temple near Toronto in 1991 were thwarted, are two examples. In both cases, terrorist attacks that could have resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives were prevented by border agents equipped with little more than keen observational skills and experience.

On 14 November 1999, Ahmed Ressam was confronted and then arrested while trying to cross the Canadian-US border. A US customs inspector with 19 years' experience, Diana Dean, questioned Ressam. She noticed that he acting in a strange manner and asked him to open the boot of his car. Ressam tried to run but was captured after a brief chase. Investigations later revealed that his car contained a powerful homemade explosive and that he was en route to attack Los Angeles International Airport.

As a result of Ressam's capture, information was obtained that prevented other attacks. Dean has remained modest about her accomplishment, but it is possible that her frontline skills saved the lives of hundreds or thousands of people.

Formed in New York and led by Sheikh Gilani, Jamaat al-Fuqra carried out violent attacks and murders during the 1980s and the early 1990s. Numbers are difficult to obtain, but the group may have carried between 15 and 18 bombings and killed 10 or more people in assassinations or bombings.

In October 1991, members of Jamaat al-Fuqra were stopped at the Niagara Falls border crossing. In a subsequent trial in Canada, it became clear that the group had intended to bomb a popular Hindu cinema and a Hindu temple near Toronto. If the attack had succeeded, the death toll would have been in the hundreds or low thousands. Several members of the group were convicted but are due to be released later this year.

As with the Ressam case, the border agents responsible for beginning the investigation that led to the arrests and convictions were not acting on previous intelligence. Their decisions to take action were based on their own observations of the individuals and situations they encountered.

The '20th hijacker'

While testifying before the US government's 9/11 Commission, border agent Jose E Melendez-Perez stated that he had refused entry to Mohamed al-Qahtani on 4 August 2001. Commission members believe that this man was the '20th hijacker' in the 11 September 2001 attacks. Melendez-Perez stated that he had worked as a border agent since 1992 and that he had acted on gut instinct. He said: "I thought the man had military training because of his impeccable physical condition, his body language and a feeling that the man had knowledge of interview techniques. Al-Qahtani had only a one-way ticket from Dubai, no hotel reservations and insufficient money for the six-night stay he said he was planning."

While gut instinct may have been at work, it is clear from his testimony that Melendez-Perez was also acting upon developed skills and training in visa procedures. Melendez-Perez did not know, however, that al-Qahtani was likely to have been travelling with Mohammed Atta, who was the pilot of one of the aircraft hijacked on 11 September 2001.

After the events of 11 September 2001, it was also found that hijackers Marwan al-Shehhi and Saeed al Ghamdi were subjected to some scrutiny by border agents who took a second look at their papers. According to investigators' reports, the three men told stories to border agents that did not fit with the visas they had. Nevertheless, all three were admitted. In this case, the frontline personnel had the information to act but did not. This may have been due to a lack of training, a lack of will or perhaps the feeling that they would not be supported by their superiors if they did act.

It is clear from these examples that frontline officials have saved the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of citizens by preventing terrorist attacks.

Terrorist operatives travel frequently and must do so for training, recruiting, financing or planning operations. They must also live within local communities, purchase supplies and communicate locally and internationally. Even some terrorists who attack within their own community or country, such as the 7 July 2005 London bombers, are known to have travelled internationally. These issues remain major vulnerabilities for potential terrorists, despite the decentralised structure and evolution of Al-Qaeda and those individuals and groups inspired to act in its name.

Policy implications

Terrorist threats following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US have been largely localised and lacking in central organisation. In order to track such threats, low-level intelligence gathering must occur at the front lines or at the street level. The information collected can then be synthesised into actionable intelligence.

Although there is currently a high degree of focus on counterterrorism activities, the resources available are limited. How can we best spend this money to protect people against terrorist attacks? The following are suggestions on how to focus resources in order to prevent terrorist attacks before they occur.

Frontline training and support: Some successes have occurred because frontline officials noted discrepancies in visas, other documents and the stories presented by travellers. Increased training and support for frontline officials is a sound investment. Further action must also be taken by supervisors to support frontline officials. A higher "false alarm" rate may occur as frontline officials challenge doubtful documents and stories, but supervisors must be willing to support the decisions of their frontline workers.

Basic policing skills: It may seem counterintuitive, but the greater the level of globalisation and internationalisation, the more important it becomes for local police officers to know their neighbourhoods. It is crucial that they think globally and act locally. An effective understanding of the local neighbourhood and changes within it are critical elements in the intelligence process. A well-informed frontline police officer is an effective weapon in combating any type of crime.

Human intelligence: The Cold War and the information revolution have given many senior leaders the often false impression that risk-free intelligence gathering can be done through technological means. While there is some truth in this, the reality remains that finding inroads into extremist or terrorist communities is still best accomplished through sources and agents. Developing these assets is an effective means of gaining insights into the activities of local communities.

Specialisation: Learning how to fight terrorism and political extremism effectively is a complicated task. It can take months or years to develop even the most basic skills required. A significant amount of operational experience is required to build up the confidence of those involved. Too often, however, staffing and promotion systems mean that frontline officers and analysts are rotated endlessly. This policy of rotation without some form of planning is self-defeating at best and negligent at worst.