



## MESSAGES FROM MUMBAI: TERRORISM AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

By Stephen Gale, Lawrence A. Husick, and Laura Rabinow

Despite the enormity of the tragedy, the events that transpired in Mumbai from November 26-29, 2008, have done us an odd kind of favor. They have served to remind us, yet again, that the specter of international terrorism is real and that the consequences of counterterrorism and homeland security failures are also very real.

We now know that the attacks on Mumbai didn't come from a disaffected group of poorly trained extremists. These were well-trained, committed fighters who could gain access to targets and adapt quickly to changing contexts and circumstances. By all accounts, including reports from both Indian and U.S. officials, the failure to anticipate and respond to the attacks was the direct result of multilevel, ongoing intelligence and analysis failures in conjunction with poorly trained and poorly organized response teams. There were a variety of warnings based on solid intelligence, from several high-quality sources, that were provided to Indian officials well before the attacks.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the ability of the Indian government (both the police and the military) to respond to the intelligence was limited, and did not result in preempting or defeating the attack. Thus the Indian response was limited by more than a lack of resources, it was limited by a *failure of imagination*.

India, of course, has no monopoly on this trait. Aside from its comprehensive, thoughtful analysis of the 9/11 attacks, the single most important finding of the 9/11 Commission was its indictment of America and Americans for what it termed failures "in imagination, policies, capabilities, and management."<sup>2</sup> Prior to the attacks, Americans simply could not believe that "hijacking" could change its meaning so radically, even though, as former CIA Director Jim Woolsey pointed out in an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, there were several warnings prior to the attacks. As with India, on 9/11 we were caught short not only by shortcomings in our response capabilities, but also by a failure of imagination.<sup>3</sup> To put the Mumbai attacks in perspective, and to understand what the attacks could mean for the future, we should begin by reviewing both what happened on 9/11 and our subsequent efforts at counterterrorism and homeland security.

As the long lines at airport security checkpoints attest, much of what the U.S. has done in the way of improving homeland security since 9/11 has focused on preventing actions of precisely the same sort: airliner hijackings, and more recently, liquid explosive manufacture in aircraft lavatories. Preparedness for other types of attacks, including Mumbai-style "low-tech" incursions (or similar attacks that might be augmented with area-denial weapons), has not progressed at anywhere near the same pace. Although we have begun to develop sophisticated sensors, alarms, and other equipment for advanced warning systems over the last seven years, they are neither fully operational, nor do they represent security for the types of target and tactic selections that are the products of a well-grounded understanding of terrorist imaginations.

While several U.S. cities have developed terrorism response capabilities, preparedness still varies widely across the nation. Meanwhile, groups like those that planned and executed the actions in Mumbai developed new organizational and operational capabilities that recognize the gaps in counterterrorism and homeland security measures. Judging by the actions in Mumbai, such groups have continued to develop innovative tactics, combining them with new forms of expertise, training, and technical capabilities. They have evolved, diversified, and grown; Western imagination and preparedness circa 2001-02 is now inadequate to address the threat.

### IMPLICATIONS

The attacks on Mumbai and the state failures that proceeded and accompanied them should be seen as a message to the United States, President-elect Obama, and his incoming security team: with the aim of causing widespread social and economic

<sup>1</sup> "Rice pressures Pakistan over Mumbai attacks." *Agence-France Presse*, New Delhi, Dec. 3, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> 9-11 Commission, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States -- Authorized Edition*. W.W. Norton, July 2004.

<sup>3</sup> R. James Woolsey, "The Iraq Connection," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 18, 2001.

disruption, Mumbai-type attacks in conjunction with our current financial crises may seem to be the right recipe for groups like al Qaeda. As Graham Allison noted in his November 30 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, there should be a greater public recognition of the threat to the U.S. in the near future given the confluence of these events. Obama's promise to rid the world of bin Laden and al Qaeda may be regarded as one impetus for terrorist actions in the near future, while there are a host of venues and contexts that logistically and symbolically provide a stage.<sup>4</sup>

The implications of Mumbai go still further. Among other things, we can see that groups like al Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba have developed the means for coordination and have been able to tap into necessary personnel and materiel. It would thus be a mistake for U.S. officials to continue to think of the depth of jihadi personnel only in terms of the rigid confines of a few organizations. These groups have demonstrated their ability to draw on more fluid bases of support from groups that share either their goals or strategies. They've been able to enlist external personnel who are nonetheless dedicated and who are able to assist in shaping actions for maximum impact, both on the ground and in the media.

The Director of the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Maj. Reid Sawyer, has stated, "You can't prevent this type of attack.... These are 10 individuals with small arms and a bunch of grenades that have killed nearly a couple hundred people and certainly wounded a large amount more."<sup>5</sup> Given the ease of replicating the Mumbai attack in other locations, the U.S. must anticipate that jihadist groups everywhere will attempt to build on such methods elsewhere. But these are just the immediate concerns. As hotels, train stations, religious institutions, and cities in the United States increase their security measures, as police forces attend retooled seminars on the changing threat of terrorism and begin to scan water approaches, the need for imagination in identifying likely targets and tactics as well as in determining our next steps should not be overlooked.<sup>6</sup>

The objectives of such terrorist attacks on the U.S. are to create social disruption and chaos; to use fear and extensive disorganization to precipitate the collapse of the United States' ability to maintain both a presence in the Middle East and its domestic economy. It is about the use of terrorism as leverage, not as a means of becoming a full-scale military power. If anything, modifications to the Mumbai tactics are far more likely to come in the form of an area-denial weapon--a "dirty nuclear bomb," which is not only easier to obtain and transport than nuclear weapons, but could be exploded in a number of locations simultaneously to create greater impact. Once again, to understand the likely selection of future terrorist tactics, we should think of *imagination, leverage*, and the change in the meaning of "hijacking" after 9/11.

## NEW MODEL

Just as U.S. participation in the "ownership" of financial services companies would have been unthinkable a year ago, we now have to approach "solutions" to potential acts of terrorism from a new paradigm. Airport security will need to be continued, but the type of awareness programs developed for New York City should be employed more generally throughout the U.S. First-responder preparedness not only entails police and fire units, but having on hand the healthcare equipment, pharmaceuticals, and transport needed to deal with the aftermath of coordinated and expanded Mumbai-style attacks.<sup>7</sup> The initial steps toward providing seamless communications for first responders will similarly need to be accelerated and put into practice, and those systems that do not work will have to be replaced quickly.

A future attack against the U.S. is likely to be directed at one of three classes of targets: chemical plants and related production facilities (including refineries); transport chokepoints (railroad trestles, interstate bridges); and/or central urban areas like Mumbai. The selection of the target is not necessarily dependent on its symbolic importance to either the U.S. or the attackers, but rather on its ability to help achieve maximum long-term disruptive impact. As with Mumbai, the selection of U.S. targets is not likely to follow from past actions. There is no reason to suspect that jihadists will be any less imaginative in future attacks than they have been in the past, and it is no stretch to imagine attacks launched at multiple types of targets and/or in multiple cities simultaneously.

There are elements of broader lessons here as well, lessons that speak to how we prioritize and organize operations for the Department of Homeland Security and related state agencies. In part, these lessons show that we must further develop and extend policies aimed at international cooperation and coordination, and they reflect the importance of continuing to build on policies now being used in Pakistan to undermine violent groups before they are able to carry out actions (c.f., the situation in Somalia). If we are to adequately address the threats to the U.S. – threats that are developed using imagination – then our approach to making investments in security must be equally innovative.

## THE THREE M'S

There are a number of steps that the U.S. can begin to take in order to build the capacities needed to counter the planning and execution of any next attacks. These must focus on what we have called the "three Ms" of counterterrorism and homeland

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<sup>4</sup> Graham Allison, "When will Osama Test Obama?" *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 30, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Dina Temple Reston, "Mumbai Attacks Offer New Lessons On Terrorism." *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, Dec. 3, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Frank, Kevin Johnson, "Mumbai attacks refocus U.S. cities," *USA Today*, Dec. 5, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Currently, for example, there are pharmaceutical treatments available that will allow first responders and rescue workers the ability to work in areas with relatively high levels of radiation without any of the normal consequences of radiation exposure.

security: *mission, method, and metrics*. The mission should be clear by now: *security*. Although some continue to believe that immunity is the only politically acceptable mission, it is highly unlikely that such a goal could be achieved; instead, we would do better by investing in measures that will result in ongoing security that allows our critical social, economic, and political institutions to continue to function should attacks occur.

With respect to *methods*, we need a more detailed appreciation of what constitutes the critical infrastructure of the nation and a means for determining the effectiveness and efficiency of investments in security. This includes methods applicable to the identification of those functions, and alternatives, that are required to maintain our economy. Such methods would provide an extensive analysis of the U.S. economy and its internal and global linkages, as well as the planning and actions that enhance survivability and minimize impacts of potential attacks through the identification of alternative means of production and transportation. Still others require even more effective methods for eliciting cooperation from U.S. allies in identifying, arresting, and/or eliminating those terrorist groups that are identified as immediate threats.

Finally, *metrics* must be focused on ensuring that investments in security--investments that are have become very precious indeed with the recent economic downturn--are guided by criteria and measures that reflect a commitment to effectiveness and efficiency.<sup>8</sup>

As a whole, these procedures are well within U.S. capabilities. What is needed is imagination; the understanding that events do not have to follow past actions to be real, that methods based on grounded expertise can be used to develop potential attack scenarios and the necessary responses to defeat their aims if not the attacks themselves. Can a Mumbai happen here? Should we take a chance finding out? An imaginative Homeland Security would think of a way to say *yes* to the first question and *no* to the second.

*Stephen Gale* is a senior fellow at FPRI, where he co-chairs the [Center on Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Homeland Security \(CTCHS\)](#), and a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania with appointments in the Departments of Regional Science and Political Science. Lawrence Husick, Esq., is a Senior Fellow at the CTCHS and co-director of the FPRI's Wachman Center program on Teaching Innovation. Laura Rabinow is a Research Assistant at CTCHS.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684.

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org) or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).

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<sup>8</sup> FPRI has developed and is working on procedures that can help in these analysis steps. See From MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) to MUD (Multilateral Unconstrained Disruption): Dealing with the New Terrorism, FPRI Wire, vol. 11, no. 1, February 2003, by Stephen Gale and Lawrence Husick and the 1998 GAO report "Combating Terrorism: Threat and Risk Assessment Can Help Prioritize and Target Program Investment" for a discussion of two of these methods.