

London Bombings Highlight the Importance of Maintaining Trust of the Public

The horrific bombings in London on 7 July 2005 are a grim reminder that terrorist attacks are aimed at undermining political will. Coming in conjunction with the G8 Summit in the United Kingdom, the attacks on the transportation system were designed to shock and frighten people throughout the West.

In October 2004 the National Center for Critical Incident Analysis held a conference at the National Defense University in Washington to explore the phenomena of political violence. Special attention was given to the Madrid bombings which came just before the elections in Spain and which changed the outcome. Two points from that conference are relevant to the London bombings.

First, in both attacks the terrorists targeted what they thought was the weak link in Western commitment for the war on terror in Iraq: public support. By hitting innocent civilians they spread alarm about the policy of the allied governments. These adversaries warned in tape recordings last year that unless the European allies withdraw their support of US operations in Iraq, reprisals could be expected. The latest attacks show that these groups have the means and the will to carry out such threats.

Second, in the Spanish attacks the violence did lead to political changes, but only because of the mishandling of the incident by the Spanish government. In Madrid the government rushed to blame homegrown terrorists and downplayed evidence linking the attacks to Islamic terrorists. Quick, erroneous finger pointing led to feelings of betrayal and a decline in trust by the public in elected officials.

Initial indications are that the British are being more careful in their evaluation of the London bombings. Preserving public confidence in the honesty of elected officials is crucial to thwarting the goals of the terrorist groups. If public support for the war in Iraq is what these adversaries are targeting, honest and candid communications with the public are crucial to prevent the success of terrorism.

The British have clearly learned from years of experience with IRA violence and, evidently, from the aftermath of the Madrid bombings as well. Those handling this attack have direct experience that is guiding their response. Their own guidelines include:

1. Only using a few highly qualified and recognizable sources for public information. (For example, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Scotland Yard, etc.).
2. Implementing a highly integrated communication system to collate information and ensure accurate and frequent updates from those same sources.
3. To underplay rather than overplay the public pronouncements.
4. To provide actionable information for the public.
5. To allow a wide-range of expressions of sympathy to be broadcast from recognizable leaders including community leaders from minority populations who may become 'targets' for revenge attacks.

The media coverage has focused on the horrifying pictures and the first person accounts. Participants in NCCIA meetings have stressed the need for care in media reporting about the motives of perpetrators of violence. Moreover, the media ought to avoid exaggeration of the extent of emotional injury and should be wary of putting “terrorism experts” on the air who do not understand the psycho-social dynamic of this sort of incident. For more information on reporting of traumatic events, see the website of our affiliated organization, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, <http://www.dartcenter.org/>

The NCCIA conference in October also looked at “the center of gravity” of al Qaeda and its affiliated Islamic groups. Their competitive strength is the ability to metastasize – to win recruits and spawn new cells. Fueled by their religious zeal and angry about Western intervention in Muslim countries, they are able to spread like cancer. The Western response to the most recent bombings ought to avoid fueling this virulence and should exploit vulnerabilities in this new method of spreading violence.