By Scott Stewart and Fred Burton

In recent months, several high-profile incidents in the USA have raised awareness of the threat posed by individuals and small groups operating under the principles of leaderless resistance. These incidents have included lone wolf attacks against a doctor who performed abortions in Kansas, an armed forces recruitment centre in Arkansas and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Additionally, a grassroots jihadist cell was arrested for attempting to bomb Jewish targets in the Bronx and planning to shoot down a military aircraft at an Air National Guard base in Newburgh, N.Y.

In addition to pointing out the threat posed by grassroots cells and lone wolf operatives, another common factor in all of these incidents is the threat of violence to houses of worship. The cell arrested in New York left what they thought to be active improvised explosive devices outside the Riverdale Temple and the Riverdale Jewish Community Center. Dr. George Tiller was shot and killed in the lobby of the Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita. Although Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad conducted his attacks against a Little Rock recruiting centre, he had conducted preoperational surveillance and research on targets that included Jewish organizations and a Baptist church in places as far away as Atlanta and Philadelphia. And while James von Brunn attacked the Holocaust Museum, he had a list of other potential targets in his vehicle that included the National Cathedral.

In light of this common thread, it might be instructive to take a more detailed look at the issue of providing security for places of worship.

Awareness: The first step

Until there is awareness of the threat, little can be done to counter it. In many parts of the world, such as Iraq, India and Pakistan, attacks against places of worship occur fairly frequently. It is not difficult for religious leaders and members of their congregations in such places to be acutely aware of the dangers facing them and to have measures already in place to deal with those perils. This is not always the case in the United States, however, where many people tend to have an "it can't happen here" mindset, believing that violence in or directed against places of worship is something that happens only to other people elsewhere.

This mindset is particularly pervasive among predominantly white American Protestant and Roman Catholic congregations. Jews, Mormons, Muslims and black Christians, and others who have been targeted by violence in the past, tend to be far more aware of the threat and are far more likely to have security plans and measures in place to counter it. The Jewish community has very well-developed and professional organizations such as the Secure Community Network (SCN) and the Anti-Defamation League that are dedicated to monitoring threats and providing education about the threats and advice regarding security. The Council on

American-Islamic Relations has taken on a similar role for the Muslim community and has produced a "Muslim community safety kit" for local mosques. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) also has a very organized and well-connected security department that provides information and security advice and assistance to LDS congregations worldwide.

There are no functional equivalents to the SCN or the LDS security departments in the larger Catholic, evangelical Protestant and mainline Protestant communities, though there are some organizations such as the recently established Christian Security Network that have been attempting to fill the void.

Following an incident, awareness of the threat seems to rise for a time, and some houses of worship will put some security measures in place, but for the most part such incidents are seen as events that take place elsewhere, and the security measures are abandoned after a short time.

Permanent security measures are usually not put in place until there has been an incident of some sort at a specific house of worship, and while the triggering incident is sometimes something that merely provides a good scare, other times it is a violent action that results in tragedy. Even when no one is hurt in the incident, the emotional damage caused to a community by an act of vandalism or arson at a house of worship can be devastating.

It is important to note here that not all threats to places of worship will emanate from external actors. In the midst of any given religious congregation, there are, by percentages, people suffering from serious mental illnesses, people engaged in bitter child-custody disputes, domestic violence situations and messy divorces. Internal disputes in the congregation can also lead to feuds and violence. Any of these situations can (and have) led to acts of violence inside houses of worship.

Security means more than alarms and locks

An effective security program is more than just having physical security measures in place. Like any man-made constructs, physical security measures - closed-circuit television (CCTV), alarms, cipher locks and so forth - have finite utility. They serve a valuable purpose in institutional security programs, but an effective security program cannot be limited to these things. Devices cannot think or evaluate. They are static and can be observed, learned and even fooled. Also, because some systems frequently produce false alarms, warnings in real danger situations may be brushed aside. Given these shortcomings, it is quite possible for anyone planning an act of violence to map out, quantify and then defeat or bypass physical security devices. However, elaborate planning is not always necessary. Consider the common scenario of a heavy metal door with very good locks that is propped open with a trashcan or a door wedge. In such a scenario, an otherwise "secure" door is defeated by an internal security lapse.

However, even in situations where there is a high degree of threat awareness, there is a tendency to place too much trust in physical security measures, which can become a kind of crutch - and, ironically, an obstacle to effective security.

In fact, to be effective, physical security devices always require human interaction. An alarm is useless if no one responds to it, or if it is not turned on; a lock is ineffective if it is not engaged. CCTV cameras are used extensively in corporate office buildings and some houses of worship, but any competent security manager will tell you that, in reality, they are far more useful in terms of investigating a theft or act of violence after the fact than in preventing one (although physical security devices can sometimes cause an attacker to divert to an easier target).

No matter what kinds of physical security measures may be in place at a facility, they are far less likely to be effective if a potential assailant feels free to conduct preoperational surveillance, and is free to observe and map those physical security measures. The more at ease someone feels as they set about identifying and quantifying the physical security systems and procedures in place, the higher the odds they will find ways to beat the system.

A truly "hard" target is one that couples physical security measures with an aggressive, alert attitude and sense of awareness. An effective security program is proactive - looking outward to where most real threats are lurking - rather than inward, where the only choice is to react once an attack has begun to unfold. We refer to this process of proactively looking for threats as protective intelligence.

The human interaction required to make physical security measures effective, and to transform a security program into a proactive protective intelligence program, can come in the form of designated security personnel. In fact, many large houses of worship do utilize off-duty police officers, private security guards, volunteer security guards or even a dedicated security staff to provide this coverage. In smaller congregations, security personnel can be members of the congregation who have been provided some level of training.

However, even in cases where there are specially designated security personnel, such officers have only so many eyes and can only be in a limited number of places at any one time. Thus, proactive security programs should also work to foster a broad sense of security awareness among the members of the congregation and community, and use them as additional resources.

Unfortunately, in many cases, there is often a sense in the religious community that security is bad for the image of a particular institution, or that it will somehow scare people away from houses of worship. Because of this, security measures, if employed, are often hidden or concealed from the congregation. In such cases, security managers are deprived of many sets of eyes and ears. Certainly, there may be certain facets of a security plan that not everyone in the congregation needs to know about, but in general, an educated and aware congregation and community can be a very valuable security asset.

Training

In order for a congregation to maintain a sense of heightened awareness it must learn how to effectively do that. This training should not leave people scared or paranoid - just more observant. People need to be trained to look for individuals who are out of place, which can be somewhat counterintuitive. By nature, houses of worship are open to outsiders and seek to

welcome strangers. They frequently have a steady turnover of new faces. This causes many to believe that, in houses of worship, there is a natural antagonism between security and openness, but this does not have to be the case. A house of worship can have both a steady stream of visitors and good security, especially if that security is based upon situational awareness.

At its heart, situational awareness is about studying people, and such scrutiny will allow an observer to pick up on demeanor mistakes that might indicate someone is conducting surveillance. Practicing awareness and paying attention to the people approaching or inside a house of worship can also open up a whole new world of ministry opportunities, as people "tune in" to others and begin to perceive things they would otherwise miss if they were self-absorbed or simply not paying attention. In other words, practicing situational awareness provides an excellent opportunity for the members of a congregation to focus on the needs and burdens of other people.

It is important to remember that every attack cycle follows the same general steps. All criminals -- whether they are stalkers, thieves, lone wolves or terrorist groups - engage in preoperational surveillance (sometimes called "casing," in the criminal lexicon). Perhaps the most crucial point to be made about preoperational surveillance is that it is the phase when someone with hostile intentions is most apt to be detected - and the point in the attack cycle when potential violence can be most easily disrupted or prevented.

The second most critical point to emphasize about surveillance is that most criminals are not that good at it. They often have terrible surveillance tradecraft and are frequently very obvious. Most often, the only reason they succeed in conducting surveillance without being detected is because nobody is looking for them. Because of this, even ordinary people, if properly instructed, can note surveillance activity.

It is also critically important to teach people - including security personnel and members of the congregation - what to do if they see something suspicious and whom to call to report it. Unfortunately, a lot of critical intelligence is missed because it is not reported in a timely manner - or not reported at all - mainly because untrained people have a habit of not trusting their judgment and dismissing unusual activity. People need to be encouraged to report what they see.

Additionally, people who have been threatened, are undergoing nasty child-custody disputes or have active restraining orders protecting them against potentially violent people need to be encouraged to report unusual activity to their appropriate points of contact.

As a part of their security training, houses of worship should also instruct their staff and congregation members on procedures to follow if a shooter enters the building and creates what is called an active-shooter situation. These "shooter" drills should be practiced regularly - just like fire, tornado or earthquake drills. The teachers of children's classes and nursery workers must also be trained in how to react.

Liaison

One of the things the SCN and ADL do very well is foster security liaison among Jewish congregations within a community and between those congregations and local, state and federal law enforcement organizations. This is something that houses of worship from other faiths should attempt to duplicate as part of their security plans.

While having a local cop in a congregation is a benefit, contacting the local police department should be the first step. It is very important to establish this contact before there is a crisis in order to help expedite any law enforcement response. Some police departments even have dedicated community liaison officers, who are good points of initial contact. There are other specific points of contact that should also be cultivated within the local department, such as the SWAT team and the bomb squad.

Local SWAT teams often appreciate the chance to do a walk-through of a house of worship so that they can learn the layout of the building in case they are ever called to respond to an emergency there. They also like the opportunity to use different and challenging buildings for training exercises (something that can be conducted discreetly after hours). Congregations with gyms and weight rooms will often open them up for local police officers to exercise in, and some congregations will also offer police officers a cup of coffee and a desk where they can sit and type their reports during evening hours.

But the local police department is not the only agency with which liaison should be established. Depending on the location of the house of worship, the state police, state intelligence fusion center or local joint terrorism task force should also be contacted. By working through state and federal channels, houses of worship in specific locations may even be eligible for grants to help underwrite security through programs such as the Department of Homeland Security's Urban Areas Security Initiative Nonprofit Security Grant Program.

The world is a dangerous place and attacks against houses of worship will continue to occur. But there are proactive security measures that can be taken to identify attackers before they strike and help prevent attacks from happening or mitigate their effects when they do.

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