

Marine barracks attack



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On May 30, 2003, CNN law center made a report, that the attack on the U. S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, that killed 241 American servicemen was an example of a state-sponsored terrorist attack. The report goes on to say that U. S. District Judge Royce Lamberth ordered that the plaintiffs in this case – the servicemen wounded in the bombing and families of those killed, “...have a right to obtain judicial relief...” (see CNN. com, 2003). This piece of news is referring to an event that happened two decades ago and yet carried so much significance that even after twenty years a U. S.

District Court deems it worthy of its precious time and resources. The event in question transformed the way the world viewterrorism. More importantly the said event transformed the way the United States perceive the capabilities and commitment of a new breed of enemy that does not believe in or rely on conventional warfare. This paper will take a closer look into the bombing. And to understand its context a part of the study will be devoted to into looking at other acts of terrorism that used the same modus operandi. Beirut, Lebanon In the year 1982, Lebanon was at war with Israel.

It is an understatement to say that the country was war-torn. The situation was bad enough that it required the presence of Western soldiers to achieve peace and if this is not possible then at least creating a sense of order in the midst of chaos. In August of 1982 American soldiers came to Lebanon as part of the multi-national peacekeeping force, which included French, Italian, and British personnel. Yet according to Kushner, the peacekeepers had one other thing in mind and it was to negotiate a cease-fire between Lebanon and Israel (2003, p. 386). It was one of the costliest mistakes the U. S. government and its armed forces ever made.

They were not welcome in Lebanon and their desire to end the war was seen as a ploy to help their ally the Israelis. So on the 23rd of October 1983, on a beautiful morning, at about 6: 20 AM, a yellow five-ton truck was carrying hundreds of kilos of explosives. The unsuspecting Lebanese guards who worked at a nearby checkpoint, “...did not notice that the bed of the Mercedes-Benz truck was pushed lower than it should have been. The truck was carrying a heavy load” (Olson, 2003, p. 4). For days the enemy has been pounding the airport with artillery fire but on this and the day before that all was peace and quiet.

This prompted many marines to take a well deserved rest. While the truck was easing its way past the checkpoint most of the marines were asleep in the Battalion Landing Team (BLT) headquarters at the Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) compound (Olson, 2003, p. 6). The Mercedes truck was waved through and “...it proceeded southward at a steady pace along the airport road. To the driver’s right beyond the airport runway, lay the beautiful Mediterranean Sea. To his left ran iron fence that separated the road from the marine’s compound” (Olson, 2003, p. 6).

Then without warning the suicide bomber driving the vehicle accelerated and made a mad dash to its intended target. The vehicle went crashing into the front door of the BLT buildings where hundreds of marines were sleeping. And then, “ Twelve thousand pounds of dynamite detonated among the sleeping marines. The four-story building collapsed to eye level, and many who were not lucky enough to die instantly were buried under tons of rubble” (2003, p. 7). As a result of the attack Shai remarked, “ Two hundred and forty-one people were killed and eighty were injured, most of which were U. S.

Marines ... This terror attack took the heaviest toll on the United States prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001” and quoting the then commander of the U. S. Marines Corp General Kelly who twenty years ago said, “ It was the largest terrorist act in the United States history ... the day became the Corps’ bloodiest since February 1945, when Marines fought to secure Iwo Jima” (Shai, 2005, p. 91). It is indeed difficult to grasp the significance of this event post-911. But before the September 11, 2001 attacks there was no precedence to the use of guerilla and suicidal tactics to achieve this kind of destruction.

A member of the U. S. Marine Corp is considered to be creme de la creme of the U. S. Armed Forces and taking a few out without firing a single shot is considered very unfortunate. But in the car bombing there were not only a handful of marines that were eliminated, there were hundreds of them and it dealt a severe blow to the collective psyche of the American people and perhaps the peacekeeping team sent to Lebanon. It was later found out that the true perpetrators were coming from the Hizballah (Party of God) which according to a fact finding committee of the U. S. government is a:

Radical Shia group formed in Lebanon; dedicated to creation of Iranian-style Islamic republic in Lebanon and removal of all non-Islamic influences from area. Strongly anti-West and anti-Israel. Closely allied with, and often directed by, Iran, but may have conducted rogue operations that were not approved by Tehran (see United States Department of State, 1993, p. 46).
Car Bombs The modus operandi used here is of course a car bomb which can be a sedan, van or in this case a truck. It is a favorite method of inflicting

severe damage. Shaul Shai asserts that the use of a car bomb has several advantages:

- A relatively large amount of explosives can be hidden inside a car and transported to the target.
- A car can prevent early detection because it blends in the background; cars, vans and trucks are a normal occurrence especially in a very busy area.
- The vehicle offers the attackers mobility and flexibility in choosing the target and reaching it.
- The vehicle enhances the lethal effect of the attack.
- The vehicle enables the arrival at the target under an innocent guise (2003, p. 15).

When it comes to a terrorist attack there is nothing more frightening than the prospect of a car bomb being used against a target.

Shai (2003) was correct in saying that a vehicle provides a disguise and place to hide the explosives while at the same time allowing the device to be moved from one place to the next. Detection is almost impossible unless the bomb maker or its accomplice would specifically point out the location of the vehicle. Imagine for a moment a car bomb parked outside a shop, outside a school, outside an office and no one would think twice that there is something wrong with that. Another advantage of a car bomb is the fact that it can be delivered to the target by surprise and moving the device very quickly from point A to point B.

In the case of the Beirut bombing the truck was able to cover the relatively long distance from the airport gate – an area designated for the general public – to the restricted zone where the temporary barracks was situated. There is no other weapon for a suicide bomber that would have fit his requirements for this specific job. A truck was used not only to provide

concealment of the explosive device but it also provides for ample space to store significant amounts of explosives. Also, a truck is one of the most common things that one can see in an airport.

And finally a truck has an engine powerful enough to ram through reinforced gates and checkpoints and able to crash through doors. At the same time the bomber can get added protection from the more sturdier frame of a truck than a sedan. Moreover, a car bomb has one final advantage, “ The preparation of a car bomb does not require any special infrastructure; any repair shop or garage can be used for these preparations” (2003, p. 15). With a car bomb a terrorist has a very flexible yet very powerful weapon and if they continue to use it and be successful with it then they would be able to achieve their main goal which is to instill fear.

Serious Intent The bombing of the U. S. Marines barracks was not an isolated case where a group suddenly decided to bomb an enemy outpost. It was a premeditated, calculated, and highly coordinated attack. In fact six months before the military barracks’ bombing a similar signature attack was successfully carried out in the U. S. Embassy in Beirut. On April 18, 1983 a Chevrolet pickup truck loaded with about 2, 000 pounds of explosives sped through the gate of the Embassy in West Beirut and then rammed itself into the building (Kushner, 2003, p. 386). According to Kushner, the explosion killed 63 people, “...in a blast so powerful it shook the U.

S. S. Guadalcanal, anchored five miles away” (2003, p. 386). After the U. S. Marine barracks bombing there was another attack using the same method of bombing the target. In less than a year from the said bombing – on September 20, 1984- another car bomb was successfully detonated in the U.

S. Embassy Ideology of Terrorism In all three attacks one can see a pattern developing. The method used can be broken down into two major aspects. The first one is the use of car bombs and the second part is the use of suicide bombers. Together these two formed a new kind of enemy which is currently being labeled as terrorists.

Terrorism is not a very easy thing to comprehend and at the same time a difficult concept that one can put a handle on. As they say, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter is profoundly true in many respects. But there are still a few valid arguments that would separate the fanatics from a true soldier that is merely defending their homeland from a zealot who will even take pride in taking out non-combatants. In the case of the terrorists like members of the Hizbollah they attack those that are not even remotely interested in taking away their lands or their freedom.

It is at this point when trying to decipher their actions is a mind boggling experience. This is perhaps the reason why the American soldiers stationed in Beirut at that time did not anticipate such savagery and suicidal intent because to their minds they were not their as oppressors but brokers of peace. And is it not that peace and goodwill are part of a universal language understood by all peoples of the world? Apparently the answer is no and it will take more than the scope of this paper to fully understand the enemy's point of view.

It is sufficient for the sake of this study to argue that the Americans made a very costly mistake. They approached the situation from a purely political standpoint. Lebanon was at war with Israel. So, they came in, putting lives and reputation on the line, being so sure that this would have been

understood by the enemy as something worthy of respect, even admiration. But what they did not realize is the fact that there are heavy undercurrents operating just below the surface and it can be said that the American government was naive enough – at that point in time – not to understand all these.

At that time the idea of fanaticism and radicalism was not fully understood. It has to be put in perspective that the nation of Israeli was still in its infancy. And this is a major issue that is driving the fanatics crazy; they do not want the existence of Israel in the Middle East. Now, here come the Americans with an offer to mediate between the two warring groups. Yet it was clear to all non-Israelis living in the Arab world that the Americans are partial to Israel. The American soldiers had no inkling that in these parts, no one saw them as peacekeepers but on the contrary they are enemy troops defiling a sacred land.

It will be found out later that the attack was driven by ideology rather than a kind of nationalistic or ethnic motive driving the perpetrators. This is because the attack was state-sponsored not by Lebanon but by Iran (see CNN. com). According to Shai, the Marine barracks bombings was claimed to be the handiwork of the Islamic Jihad organization which was nothing more than a cover name for Pro-Iranian radical Shiite entities (2005, p. 91). Describing the attackers as a product of a movement or an ideology is not an accurate description.

If one uses the argument of ideology then one should use Communism or Marxism as an example which is the struggle for an idea. Communists and Marxists would go to war for this idea and this is similar to what has

transpired in the said attacks but there is something more to the suicide bombers than meets the eye. This is because they are not simply fighting for an idea but they are advancing a different kind of spirituality mixed with their own brand of politics. In fact it is difficult to see where politics end and where religion begins in the bombings that occurred in the 1980s and all those that followed subsequently.

It is therefore more helpful to see the bombing from the perspective of some theorists like Tore Bjorgo who suggests that the perpetrators of the car bombings were terrorists and that they use methods or strategies of combat that, "...involves premeditated use of violence against (at least primarily) non-combatants in order to achieve a psychological effect of fear on others than the immediate targets" (2005, p. 2). These acts of terrorism are guided by a spiritual and political framework which makes it so difficult to anticipate and so hard to neutralize. Human nature is predictable, it is the preservation of ones own life.

People will kill others for self-defense and they would even kill their friends for self-preservation but they will not offer their lives for others. In many instance a person will perhaps die trying to save someone but it is rare to see someone die to make a statement or to force others to do something. It is no wonder why the U. S. personnel were ill-equipped to neutralize a new type of enemy soldier that emerged in the battle grounds of the Middle East. The Aftermath From the definition above of terrorism one can say that the attack on the U. S. Marine barracks was unique because in a normal terrorist attack the targets are non-combatants.

But in this case the terrorists were able to strike hard and fast against the intended target which are the soldiers. According to Shaul Shai, “ One of the guidelines pertaining to the issue of suicide attacks require that the attack achieve exceptional results which can be applied as leverage for political or military changes, and inflict significant losses upon the enemy. In addition, the suicide terrorist must carry out his deed out of a sense of complete understanding and recognition regarding the value of his deed and his personal martyrdom” (2005, p. 91)

Considering the above statement it can be argued that the terrorists responsible for the attack were indeed successful and that they achieved what they set out to do. With regards to the goal of creating leverage for political or military changes, Kushner - referring to the Embassy and Marine barracks attacks - alluded to how the terrorist group indirectly influenced the outcome of the political and military scenario. And Kushner wrote, “ The double horror of these disasters led to a drop in public support of the U. S. military presence in Lebanon and hastened the withdrawal of U.

S. and Western European troops from the country” (2003, p. 386). The attacks also achieved one of its primary goals which is to wage an effective psychological warfare over their enemies situated thousands of miles away. In a report to the former President Reagan, Vice-President George Bush made the following remarks, “ Terrorism deeply troubles the American people. A Roper poll ... showed that 78 percent of all Americans consider terrorism to be one of the most serious problems facing the U. S. Government today ...” (Bush, 1987, p. 22).

Conclusion The attack on the temporary U. S. Marines barracks on October 23, 1983 at Beirut, Lebanon was one of the deadliest ever. What makes it sadder is the fact that those who died were one of the best and brightest that the U. S. military forces could offer. They died not from combat but from the hands of a fanatical terrorist group that did not consider the fact that they came for peace. The Americans were given strict instructions on maintaining extreme tolerance. They were there to initiate a cease fire between Lebanon and Israel.

For their noble efforts they were rewarded with a deadly car bomb that took 241 lives - most of them died in their beds without given a chance to defend themselves. The motivation is a crazy mix of politics, ideology, and religion. Conventional warfare is out of the question and the enemy is content in eliminating even non-combatants. In the case of the barracks bombing they felt double pleasure in knowing that they were not only able to take out American lives but also that they dealt a major blow to their primary targets which were the elite U. S. Marines.