

Critical lessons for the taking

Leonard A. Cole
07/22/2007 20:57

The US has much it can learn from Israel about how to protect itself against terrorism.

Weeks after the bungled car bombings in Britain, though nearly six years after 9/11, preparedness for terrorism in the US remains uneven at best. While some earlier weaknesses have been mitigated, such as airport screening, others have not. One underused resource is the collection of lessons from Israel's long experience with terrorism.

Not all Israeli measures are acceptable elsewhere. Profiling according to ethnic and national backgrounds, for example, is practiced for security purposes in Israel, but taboo in the US. Moreover, Israel has no special experience in dealing with certain threats such as those from nuclear weapons. Still, many Americans responsible for preparedness and security have visited Israeli counterparts and report benefiting immensely. Just what is it that Americans take away from their visits? The answer lies in two general areas: appreciation of Israeli resiliency and hands-on practices.

During the five-year intifada that began in 2000, Palestinian terrorists launched about 400 attacks against Israeli cafes, shops, buses and other civilian targets. Despite the destruction and loss of life, the facilities were commonly repaired within days and patrons were soon dining and shopping as before. Surveys showed that patriotism and the percentage of people who said they wanted to live in Israel climbed during the period when attacks were most frequent.

Israel is an open society whose political and religious divisions are patently visible. Yet in the face of terrorism and other external threats, the population has shown a strong sense of community. American visitors are invariably impressed by the will of the Israelis to live as normally as possible in a hostile environment. Their determined resilience is symbolized by a memorial near the Dolphinarium, the former Tel Aviv dance hall where a suicide bomber killed 21 young people in 2001. A life-size iron silhouette depicts a boy and girl holding hands beneath a simple inscription: "We will not stop dancing."

Although attitudes in one country may not be easily grafted to another, Israeli resilience is a demonstration to outsiders of the possibilities in a democratic society. But unlike attitudes, tangible practices are readily transferable given the will to accept them.

A PRIME weakness in American practices arises from the inability of response agencies throughout the country to communicate quickly with each other. Tragic miscues occurred on 9/11 because uniformed rescuers used different radio spectrums, and the New York City police and fire departments still operate on incompatible frequencies.

In Israel, by contrast, police, firefighters, emergency responders, and hospitals can talk to each other directly, or through a communications center. Homeland security officials in the US estimate that radio compatibility throughout the country might not be available until 2023. Building an inter-operable system could cost billions, but waiting another half-generation should be deemed unacceptable. Meanwhile, other Israeli approaches to preparedness could be implemented quickly and at minimal expense.

At the outset, common standards for preparedness should be required throughout the US, as is the case in Israel. Currently the federal government issues only advisories, and protocols for performance are written at local and state levels. The result is a hodge-podge of plans that vary widely from one community to another. Despite the greater size of the US, federally mandated standards are key to uniform quality, even while management of limited events would remain with local and regional authorities. One such mandate, again following Israeli practice, should specify the number and nature of terror and disaster drills that police, firefighters, and emergency responders must undertake annually. Further, assessments of drills should not be in the hands of the agencies performing the drills, as is now the case in the US. In Israel, assessments are always made by outside observers to avoid conflict of interest.

Among the most significant of Israeli innovations has been the recent emergence of "terror medicine" as a distinctive discipline. A suicide bombing can cause a combination of injuries not otherwise seen in one patient - burn, blast, crush and numerous penetrations from nails and bolts. Treating such victims by the hundreds, both physically and emotionally, requires new approaches. Yet few civilian responders outside Israel are familiar with these and other aspects of terror medicine. As with other hands-on measures, Americans could gain much from instruction based on Israeli models.

AFTER SPENDING time with their counterparts in Israel, many American local and state officials have implemented changes independently. Washington DC's police chief Charles Ramsey has adopted a Jerusalem practice of flashing lights from cars on regular patrol, to elevate an impression of police presence. Ted

Sexton, president of the National Sheriff's Association, learned approaches he deemed "invaluable" for bomb dismantlement and keeping the public informed without revealing intervention techniques to terrorists. Dr. Jeffrey Ponsky, chairman of the American Board of Surgery, has begun developing a medical simulation program at a Cleveland medical center based on the model he saw in Israel. Rick Fuentes, superintendent of the New Jersey State Police, has implemented a new system of coordination for homeland security among the state's agencies. "This fundamentally changed the way we operate in New Jersey and was sparked by my Israel experience," he told me. These reactions underscore the value of connecting Americans and Israelis across a range of disciplines.

The contacts thus far have largely been ad hoc, initiated by individuals and private groups who recognize their value. In some instances participants have funded their own trips, in others they have received support from private or local government sources. But the number of American officials who have visited Israel or been exposed to its practices is a tiny fraction of all who could benefit.

WHAT IS needed is a central body to coordinate and regularize these linkages. A binational agency could identify American and Israeli counterparts most suitable for exchange visits in a variety of spheres - security, law enforcement, medical care, disaster management. Israeli experts have demonstrated their eagerness to share knowledge with American counterparts. Their experience is a gift for the taking. Teaching more Americans about Israeli techniques could ultimately save lives.

The writer is a political scientist at Rutgers University and author most recently of Terror: How Israel Has Coped and What America Can Learn.