

Return of the Car Bombs

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The latest car bomb attack in Barcelona, Spain, if read with recent such attacks during the last two years elsewhere in Sweden, France and England will highlight the continuous improvisation in terrorist techniques in targeting innocent civilians in Europe. Car bombs are not a new phenomenon; nor they are exclusively European. Since the 1970s, the world of terrorism has extensively witnessed the use of car as an instrument of explosion in Europe, Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

However, the trend that one witnesses in Europe during the last two years is a new phenomenon. Cars and trucks are being used as a vehicle of terror, without adding explosives to it. The perpetrator has either stolen the vehicle or used his own and bulldoze into a crowded area. What can the State do, given the easy access to vehicles, the easy availability of targets and the difficulty in securing such places?

Barcelona: Déjà vu

The August 2017 attack in Barcelona is a repeat of what has happened earlier in other parts of Europe. In Barcelona, a terrorist believed to be linked to the Islamic State, drove a van into a crowd killing 13 people and injuring many. In June 2017, in London Bridge, van borne attackers mowed three civilians, before going on a killing spree with their knives. In April 2017, an Uzbek asylum seeker drove a truck into a shopping area in Stockholm in Sweden killing four. In March 2017, a British Muslim convert drove a car into the crowd in Westminster bridge in London, killing four.

The worst attacks using cars and trucks in Europe happened in 2016. The first one took place in July 2016 in Nice in France, when a Tunisian born mowed a truck into a crowd, watching firework on the occasion of Bastille Day celebrations. Later in December 2016, in Berlin another Tunisian asylum seeker drove a truck into a Christmas market crowd killing twelve.

Clearly, the car and truck bombs are being used as a strategy to carryout terror attacks in Europe. The strategy is not to plant explosives, as has been the case in the Middle East and South Asia; rather, the perpetrators use the vehicles to ram into the crowd.

Vehicles as Bombs: Significance of Cars and Trucks

Use of vehicles as an instrument of attack is not a new phenomenon. In the past, even ships, planes and tanks were used as an instrument of terror. However, cars and trucks as instruments of terror are deadly, due to their easy availability.

It is not easy to steal or use ships, tanks and planes as a vehicle of attack. The State had used the above three as an instrument more than the non-State actors. These acts were considered as a part of warfare; the primary difference with the State led attacks was in terms of the target. Though there were also civilian casualties in these attacks, they were more of collateral in nature or a part of a larger war.

Car Bombs: No More Déjà vu

Cars and trucks have been used as a weapon of explosion by many groups – from the IRA in UK to the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Improvised explosive devices are planted in the cars, which are parked near the target area; these weapons were either exploded through a timing device or remotely controlled.

The classic car bombs were packed with explosives and mostly were stationary. The advent of suicide bomber age has improvised the above option for the militants. There have been numerous cases of suicide bombers, filling enormous explosives in a large truck and bulldoze into the target area. During the last ten years, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan – there were numerous such attacks – on both civilian and military targets.

Though these attacks created enormous damage primarily to the entry points, the objective was not to reach the sanctum sanctorum of the target areas, but to make them vulnerable. This modus vivendi has resulted in military and civilian installations investing substantially to protect the entry points. The hotel industry in particular has taken a substantial hit – in terms of increasing their entry points. And in the process, one could see the wait and unpleasant exchanges in the entry points as one enters those star hotels.

Further improvisation took place in the terror manual using the car bomb. As security got tightened and detection technology improved, transporting explosives from one point to another is no more easy. The advent of cameras in the entrances and street corners has made parking vehicles for a longer period suspicious.

As technology in detection became hi-tech, the terrorists seem to be getting simpler and improvising. Instead of planting an improvised explosive device in a car or a truck (that demands huge explosives and transporting them without getting detected), they have decided to just pick up a vehicle and ram it into a crowded area. The bigger the vehicle, as was the case in France last year, larger the casualty rate.

Will the State cope up?

The State remains a spectator in events relating to the terrorists using cars and trucks as a weapon of terror. Especially in Europe, where the civil society is not used to the terror that regions like South Asia are, it is not easy for the State to provide fool proof security measures to the festivals, markets and

regular crowd gathering areas.

The State will have to invest in intelligence gathering and preventing such attacks. The State, especially in Europe in the recent years, has been investing on policing. The process has to expand and also look into the larger question of radicalization. It is easier to blame the Islamic State or al Qaeda for recruiting Europeans; but, why would a radical ideology attract the citizens of these liberal democratic States? Is liberalism, democracy and good governance not sufficient enough for the State to prevent its own citizens from taking part in violent activities elsewhere.

Also the State in Europe will have to deal with another question of returning jihadis. Until recently, the State was reluctant to have adequate legal measures to prosecute their citizens for activities related to terrorism elsewhere. Now these jihadi returnees should fasten the State to take adequate measures to prosecute, for bringing terror back into their own countries.

Outside the citizens, in few cases, for example Sweden and Germany, the perpetrators were asylum seekers. Given the tensions already in Europe, this is likely to create more problems for the State and create new faultlines within the society – between the locals and outsiders.

Making effective measures to combat car and truck bombings would not be an easy process and is unlikely to take place in the near future. Until that time, it would be unfortunate, if there are similar attacks.