Are our children terrorist targets?

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Are U.S. children potential terror targets? While such a notion is almost impossible to contemplate, evidence increasingly suggests that U.S. intelligence efforts must be alert to this horrific possibility and that schools and first-responders should have appropriate emergency plans.

Last September, a suspected Iraqi insurgent with potential al Qaeda ties was found with a computer disk containing detailed information about the layouts and emergency plans of schools in California, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey and Oregon. This discovery came only weeks after terrorists targeted a Russian school, killing 186 children in Beslan, a strategically unimportant town hundreds of miles south of Moscow.

It is painfully clear that the Beslan school was not a random target. The explicit intent of the terrorists was to endanger the greatest number of children, and that's precisely what happened. Bombs were rigged to maximize casualties, shooters used children as human shields and suicide bombers placed themselves near as many terrified young people as possible.

Could there be a connection between the attack in Beslan and the discovery of information on U.S. schools in the possession of an Iraqi insurgent? The quite probable answer is yes, and the link is al Qaeda. Although the attack in Beslan was carried out by an ultra-extremist Chechen separatist group, active participation of "outsiders" with connections to al Qaeda was clearly established.

What is it about al Qaeda's involvement that should demand a special focus on the targeting of U.S. children as an explicit strategy? A review of information gathered in the last few years provides significant warning that children have long been considered fair game by al Qaeda. In November 2002, for instance, it was reported that the same al Qaeda group responsible for the deadly nightclub attack killing nearly 200 people in Bali also had plans to strike U.S. and western students attending international schools in Indonesia. This plot was uncovered not long after intelligence agencies intercepted a plot to attack an American school in Singapore in late 2001.

At work here seems to be the fulfillment of an al Qaeda manifesto discovered in Afghanistan after Sept. 11, 2001, and having distinct roots in a long-standing commitment to retribution for alleged U.S. and western policies blamed for the deaths of millions in Arab and Muslim nations. In the manifesto, al Qaeda spokesperson and adviser to Osama bin Laden, Sulieman Abu Gheith, declares: "We have not reached parity with [America]. We have the right to kill 4 million Americans, 2 million of them children, and to exile twice as many and wound and cripple hundreds of thousands." The diatribe continues, alluding to the "right" to use chemical and biological weapons.

What can be done? Internationally, attacks directed at children must elicit universal and total condemnation by all communities in New weigness' clasion and similar behaves at COLE 2008 labeled as murderers by the political and religious leaders of Arabs and Muslims, with the goal of marginalizing those who seek refuge in quasi-religious or political rationales. Outrage should not be expressed by America and its western allies alone.

In the United States, responding to terrorism directed at children must be a central part of national and state preparedness planning. This means marshalling and coordinating intelligence resources and carefully rethinking safety and security plans for schools and other facilities where children congregate.

For schools, basic preparations should include detailed response and evacuation plans that are coordinated with local law enforcement and other first responders. Communications systems are also necessary, along with contingency provisions, should it ever be necessary for students and school personnel to remain in a facility for extended periods. In California, Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, secured a grant from the Department of Education to strengthen primary- and secondary-school emergency response, train school personnel, students and parents in emergency procedures and strengthen coordination between school officials and first-responders and health and mental-health agencies. This should be followed by a national effort for all schools.

Finally, in thinking about the medical and emotional needs of children exposed to terrorism, children cannot be simply considered "little adults." Training and resources for first-responders -- fire, police and medical professionals -- must address the specific needs of children, particularly so in the event of a chemical, radiological or biological attack.

This must be of the highest priority for the nation. We never want to have to look back at a possible future catastrophe thinking we were sufficiently warned, yet failed to do all we could to protect our children.

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