

Counter Terror's High-tech to Low-tech Backfire

By

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As the media ponders how Israel will respond to [Iranian missile attack](#), many remain awestruck by the September 17, 2024, Israeli [pager attack](#) and subsequent [walkie-talkie](#) detonations that killed or injured Lebanon-based Hezbollah fighters. While the legality of such an attack is debatable, some are considering this a next step in using [technology in warfare](#). Some are concerned that terrorists may copy the method.

Hezbollah, now attempting to fend off Israel's [September 30 ground operation](#), is simultaneously working to adapt its own approach to technology, and, if history is any indicator of the future, the terror group will likely continue as it has, answering Israel's high-tech efforts with ironically harder to trace low-tech options. That Hezbollah was even using pagers was to [avoid cellular detection](#). And as they adapt, their communications will likely go even more analog, perhaps communicating only through [couriers](#), as Osama Bin Laden was known to do, or using physical handwritten [notes and dead drops](#), as militant Italian anarchist groups did in the early 2000s.

While the idea of a terrorist group obtaining a more technologically advanced arsenal, such as nuclear or chemical weapons, or instituting a mass cyberattack is daunting, it is not exactly uncommon due to expense and required expertise. What is far more likely is that Hezbollah and other terrorist groups will downgrade methods, opting for cheaper and easier to implement weapons and methods which are more than capable of lethal outcomes.

Time and time again, society has seen heavy damage wrought on person and property via methods that seem relatively primitive.

In 2021, the Gaza-based terrorist group Hamas increased their use of [incendiary balloons](#) when attacking Israel, causing more than 20 fires in southern Israel, straining civilian and IDF emergency service resources, and burning upward of 10,000 acres of farmland over the preceding three years. These "balloons are easily constructed and require little setup to launch compared to rockets, which are expensive and time-consuming to produce" but are still incredibly effective.

In 2013, a US power plant in California was victim of an as yet unsolved [shooting attack](#), damaging multiple transformers. Surprisingly set up with little to no security, the plant's perimeter was breached and approximately 100 rounds of high-powered rifle ammunition were fired into 17 transformers before police arrived. The damage was severe enough that to avoid blackouts across Silicon Valley power had to be diverted from other areas during the months-long repair.

While these incidents are high profile, given the critical infrastructure connections, they did not result in any fatalities. However, that is not always the goal of terrorists and is hardly the reality for other common low-tech methods. Shootings, bombings, and melee attacks continue to make up the [overwhelming majority](#) of terrorist attacks. Research from the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) shows that from 2015 to 2020, 85 percent of terror attacks employed one of these methods, with 12 percent being unrealized threats, 2 percent other, and 1 percent vehicle ramming.

The numbers are remarkably similar for lethal attacks in 2023 according to the [2024 Global Terrorism Index](#) published by Vision of Humanity. Out of the 50 most lethal terrorist attacks, only one, an incident in the Homs Province of Syria, featuring an explosive-laden unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) targeting a military graduation ceremony which killed 89 people, could be thought of as a high-tech weapon. The other 49 were made up of 43 armed assaults, five bombings, and one explosive projectile.

As terrorist groups get backed into a corner by high-tech counter methods like the Israeli pager attack, it is increasingly likely they will rely on time-proven simple methods. The world may even see them adapting and learning from accidents such as the September 2024 [car crash into a gas pipeline](#) in Texas which caused an explosion or the 2017 Hamburg, Germany, airport evacuation which resulted from the accidental discharge of a simple, lipstick-sized can of [pepper spray](#). While these were both accidents, one can imagine the economic and fear-induced impact if a terrorist group were to try to replicate the outcomes.

There are, of course, outliers to the terrorist use of low-tech methods. There is the terrorist cult Aum Shinrikyo's launch of the notorious [Tokyo Sarin gas attack](#) in 1995 or drone attacks along the lines of 2023's drone attack in Syria, as well as other groups' potential use of [commercial drones](#). But today's would-be terrorist is likely not resorting to high-tech weapon or communication devices, and more often than not, going for something easy and/or available. To borrow from Christopher Nolan's Joker in the [Dark Knight](#), items like "dynamite, and gunpowder, and gasoline [are] cheap" and are going to comprise the bulk of the future threats from terrorist groups.

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