Blasts in Boston
Boaz Ganor asks who is responsible for the terrorist attack

Who is responsible for the terrorist attack in Boston?

By BOAZ GANOR

A s a rule, terrorist attacks can be divided into two types: “personal initi- 
vative” attacks, and “organized terrorism.”

In organized terrorism, a ter-

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rorist organization is involved in one, some, or all of the stages of a terrorist attack: ini-
tiation, planning, preparation, perpetration. A terrorist organization may initiate an attack that is ultimately perpe-
trated by others unaffiliated with it. Or one organization or local organization or group conduct a ter-
rorist attack by passing on intelligence, supplying weapons, training the attacker,
or providing funding.

Alternatively, an organiza-
tion may initiate, plan and pre-
pare an attack so that others can execute it. All of these sce-
narios constitute “indirect organized terrorism.” On the other hand, in “direct 
organ- 
ized terrorism,” a terrorist organization may be involved in all stages of the initiation and preparation of an attack, and then in fact send its own operatives to perpetrate it.

Direct organized terrorism may be implemented by one of a terrorist organization’s local cells, sleeper cells, or individual activists.

In contrast, a personal ini-

iative terrorist attack is one in which no terrorist organization has played any part. No organiza-
tion initiated it, no organiza-
tion planned it, no organiza-
tion prepared it, and its perpe-
trators were not members of any terrorist organization.

In some cases, a terrorist organiza-
tion may inspire or incite a local terrorist network or “lone wolf” to perpetrate an attack, even without taking any active part in the specific attack.

A personal initiative terrorist attack begins and ends in the fabric mind of an individual, or in the dark dis-
cussions of a local group which, for whatever reason, has decided to launch a terror-

ist attack. When a personal ini-

iative attack is carried out by an individual who is neither affiliated with nor sent by a ter-
rorist organization, we say he or she has acted as a “lone wolf.” His or her motives may be personal-psychological, 
aliend with the motives of a local group, or derived from global political motives.

The psychologically-driven lone wolf may be responding to an internal imperative born of a past traumatic incident (however, if this incident and the response to it are not polit-
ical, then the lone wolf’s attack is a crime, and not terrorism, and constitutes murder or attempted murder). The lone wolf impelled by local impera-
tives may be responding to a local political situation – that is, to the statements, events, processes or decisions of his municipal, state, or even fed-
eral government (e.g., recent efforts to increase gun control in the United States).

The lone wolf inspired by global political considerations usually decides to carry out a terrorist attack after protracted exposure to nationalist, reli-
gious, ethnic or socio-economic indoctrination and incen-
tive, which have reached him obliquely, through the media or the Internet – (blogs, Web sites, chat rooms, Face-
book and other social net-

working sites) – or directly, through his immediate social circle – (spiritual mentors or leaders, teachers, relatives, peers).

Although the politically 

motivated lone wolf may 

attack in response to a con-
crete event, his decision to do so is usually not a momentary caprice; rather, it is most often the culmination of a process of radicalization, involving con-
tinuous exposure to agitation and encouragement.

It is worth noting that organized terrorism is usually more sophisticated and com-
plex than personal initiative terrorism, and therefore often causes many more casualties. This is unsurprising, given that terrorist organizations have greater capability, resources and experience than does any individual attacker.

However, terrorist organiza-
tions may fall prey to infiltra-
tion by intelligence agents. The multiplicity of people involved in the clandestine initia-
tion, planning, prepa-
ration and execution of an organized terrorist attack cre-
ates a risk that information will leak out to security per-
sonnel, who may try to pre-
empt the attack.

In contrast, personal ini-

iative attacks are usually less complex. The lone terrorist uses primitive means: “cold” weapons such as a knife or gun; vehicular attack, home-

made, improvised explosive 
device. While the number of casualties a lone attacker can cause is therefore more lim-
ited, the likelihood of thwarting his attack is also smaller.

Because personal initiative attacks are perpetrated after an individual has made a very personal decision – one he has most likely not shared with even those closest to him – it is almost impossible to obtain early intelligence regarding his intentions.

Those who are now tasked with investigating the terrorist attack at the 2013 Boston 

Marathon must determine just what sort of attack it was. Was it an instance of organized ter-
rorism, carried out by a local group or cell sent on a mission by an organization headquar-
tered outside the US? Or was it the personal initiative of a lone wolf or a local network unaffili-
ated in any way with – even if influenced by – a particular ter-
orist organization? It is too soon to know.

However, if we assess the slay-
ers of information already available, it appears the attack was conducted using small, improvised explosive devices, and that the devices that exploded were placed very close to one another. We may therefore hazard a calculated guess that this terrible attack was the personal initiative of a local group or a lone wolf who, in this case, succeeded in fulfilling the dream of modern terror-
ism: an attack that was organized to perpetrate an attack among a con-

densed crowd of people in the presence of a large media contingent. The chosen target – the finish line of the Boston Marathon – provided both of these key variables.

Nevertheless, and despite the immense importance of this event to sports enthusiasts from around the world, the Boston Marathon is a local event. The residents of other US cities may barely be aware of this marathon. It is not an interna-
tional event commemorated with, say, the Olympics. It did not take place at a famous, 
symbolic site like the World Trade Center or the Empire State Building in New York, or the Pentagon in Washington, DC. This also suggests that the Initiative was local, whether the attack itself was perpetrat-
ed by a lone wolf, by a limited network not tied to an estab-
lished terrorist organization, or even by an independent sleeper cell affiliated with a local or international terrorist organization.

A more decisive answer to these questions and, primarily, swift and precise identification of the specific nature and plan of this attack will promote a more efficient investigation that will lead to the whereabouts of those involved. Clarification of the type and nature of this attack will also facilitate an examination of the function-
ing of security forces and the derivation of lessons whose implementation may reduce, or preclude, harm from similar terrorist events in the future.

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