



A Look at Terrorist Behavior: How They Prepare, Where They Strike

by Brent Smith, Ph.D.

Timothy McVeigh, the Sept. 11 hijackers and Eric Rudolph all had something in common — they selected targets hundreds of miles from where they lived. McVeigh wandered the Midwest living as a transient before making his bomb in Herington, Kan., and driving 250 miles south to blast the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The Sept. 11 hijackers traveled hundreds of miles to their targets. And Rudolph drove nearly 300 miles from Murphy, N.C., to bomb an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Ala.

For local police departments searching for ways to stop terrorist acts before they occur, this does not bring much comfort. When looking at these attacks, officers might get the impression that there is not much they can do about terrorism other than improving physical security at high-risk targets.

But were these infamous terrorists typical?

Although we know a great deal about the behavior of traditional criminals, little information has been available about terrorists. Are they much different from conventional criminals, who tend to commit their crimes close to home?¹ Research has shown that traditional criminals are spontaneous, but terrorists seem to go to great lengths preparing for their attacks — and may commit other crimes while doing so. How long does this planning take? And do different types of terrorist groups vary in preparation time?

To help answer these questions, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) launched a series of projects to explore patterns of terrorist behavior.² In the first of these projects, a panel of experts³ was assembled to examine 60 case studies involving terrorist incidents in the U.S. during the past 25 years.⁴ These cases involved the four major types of U.S. terrorist groups: left wing, right wing, single

issue and international.^{5,6,7} The panel — including this author — looked at the homes of the terrorists, the locations of planning and preparation, and the sites of the terrorist incidents to discover whether any patterns emerged.

What we learned was intriguing: The cases of McVeigh, the Sept. 11 hijackers and Rudolph are actually unusual. In fact, we found that most terrorists live close to their selected targets, and they engage in a great deal of preparation — some over the course of months or even years — that has the potential of coming to the attention of local law enforcement.

Terrorists Think Globally but Act Locally

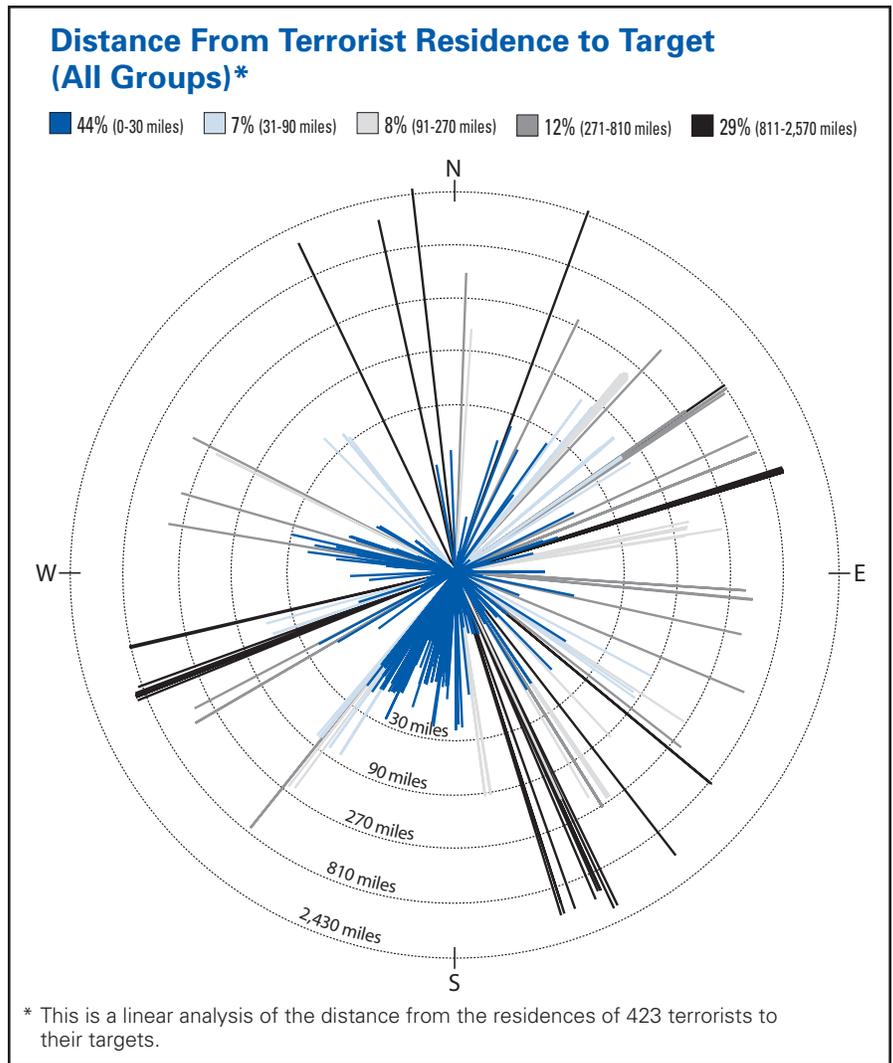
We studied:

- Ten attacks by international groups that involved 93 preparatory acts.
- Fourteen attacks by right-wing groups that involved 55 preparatory acts.
- Twenty-nine attacks by environmental groups that involved 80 preparatory acts.
- Six attacks by left-wing groups that involved eight preparatory acts.

According to our analysis, almost half (44 percent) of all terrorists examined lived within 30 miles of their targets. (See spatial analysis on this page, “Distance From Terrorist Residence to Target (All Groups).”) When the types of terrorist groups are examined separately, however, the findings are much different.

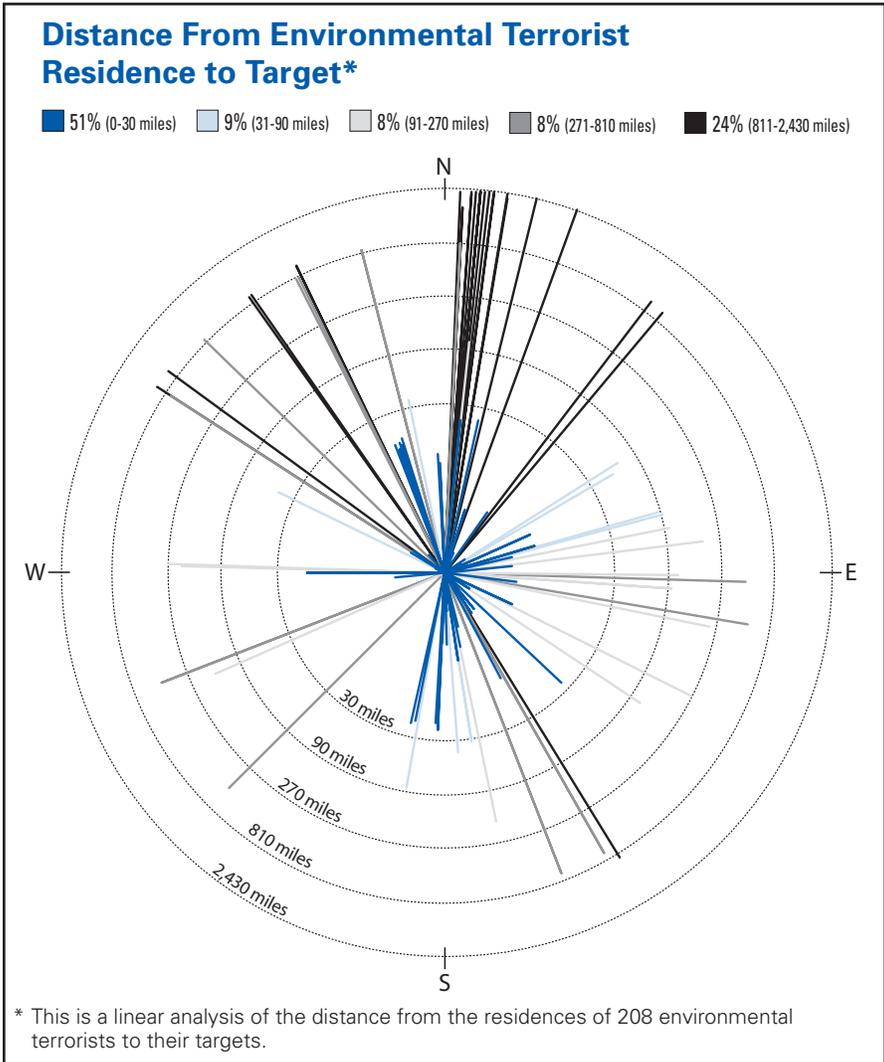
International terrorists lived relatively near their targets, whereas right-wing terrorists lived in rural areas but selected targets reflecting the “pollutants of urban life” in nearby cities.

Terrorists most commonly prepared for their attacks with surveillance and intelligence gathering, robberies and thefts to raise funding for the group, weapons violations, and bomb manufacturing. Again, most of these behaviors took place relatively near their homes, which, in turn, were close to the



targets. Terrorists may stay close to home because of new immigration status, lack of transportation, lack of knowledge of the urban landscape or a desire to avoid attention. Among single-issue terrorists in particular, 71 percent of the preparatory acts occurred within 12 miles and 92 percent within 28 miles of the target. This finding may also be attributed to the use of “uncoordinated violence” tactics by these environmental and anti-abortion extremists, which often results in local targeting by “lone wolves” sympathetic to the cause.

A separate follow-up NIJ project⁸ that analyzed the distance between more than 250 environmental and international terrorists’ homes and their targets confirmed the earlier preliminary findings that their spatial patterns are fairly similar. The analysis



found that about half of the environmental terrorists and nearly three-fifths of the international terrorists lived within 30 miles of their targets. (See the figure on this page, “Distance From Environmental Terrorist Residence to Target” and the one on page 5, “Distance From International Terrorist Residence to Target.”) Sixty-five percent of the environmental terrorists and 59 percent of the international terrorists prepared for their attacks within 30 miles of their target sites.

Although the terrorists studied committed most of their preparatory offenses near their homes, they conducted robberies, burglaries and thefts much farther away — an average of 429 miles from home. This suggests that most environmental and international terrorists live near the selected target and conduct surveillance and other general preparation near their homes and the eventual location

of the attack. Major crimes to procure funding for the group — like thefts, robberies and burglaries — however, are intentionally committed many miles away to avoid drawing attention to the group’s location and target choice.

The Terrorist’s Timepiece

We found that preparations generally began less than six months before the attack and ended with a flurry of actions a day or so before. This pattern varied by group type. Single-issue and right-wing terrorists engaged in substantially less preparatory crime over a shorter period — once again, most likely reflecting the use of “leaderless resistance” and lone-wolf strategies. The planning cycle of international terrorists tended to be longer. (See the table on page 5, “Cumulative Percentage of Preparatory Acts Over Time.”)

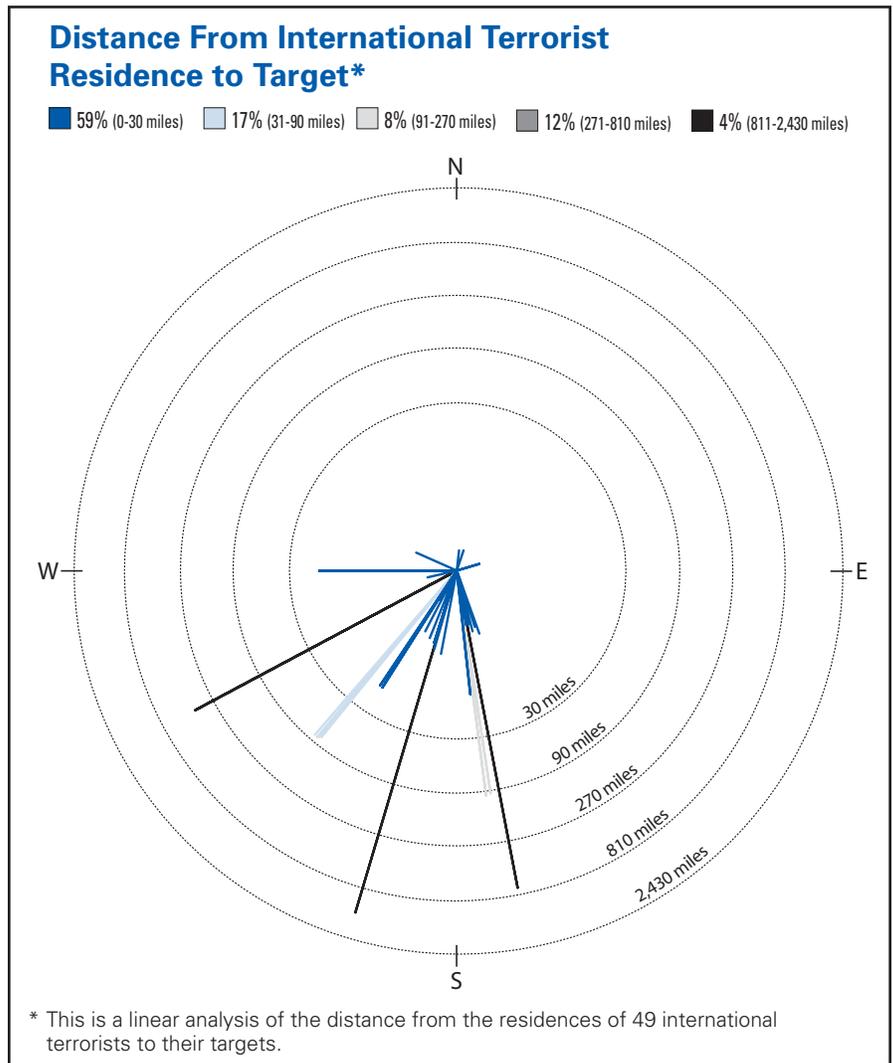
In our follow-up study, we took a closer look at the specific patterns of international and environmental terrorists by placing the preparations for all incidents on a time line. For instance, we examined the 21 incidents attributed to the environmental terrorist group known as “The Family,” which was responsible for the Vail, Colo., ski resort arson in 1998 and many attacks against Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management buildings from 1996 to 2000. The Family consisted of at least 16 people. Unlike most environmental terrorists who use uncoordinated violence and lone-wolf strategies, the group’s actions were more spontaneous than other environmental cases, with a short preparation period and little extended planning. Eighty-five percent of their known preparation activities — typically, inspection of the target, purchase of bomb-making items from local stores and identification of a staging area a short distance from the target — occurred within six days of the planned attack. An explosive device was assembled at the staging area a day or so before the incident and then delivered to the target. Participants usually returned to the staging area to destroy any evidence.

International terrorists, on the other hand, engaged in nearly three times as many preparatory acts per incident as their

environmental counterparts. This may be due to the larger number of people usually involved in international incidents, the size and scope of the planned incident or simply a longer planning cycle. Comparing the 10 international terrorist incidents that occurred on American soil,⁹ we found that the average planning cycle for international terrorists was 92 days, as opposed to 14 days for environmental terrorists. Averages can be misleading, however, because of significant outliers, such as the multiyear planning cycle of the Islamic extremists seeking to destroy New York City landmarks in the mid-1990s. Whereas environmental terrorists committed an overwhelming majority of their preparatory activities in the week before the incident, international terrorists took up to six months to prepare.

Arming Police With Knowledge

For law enforcement agencies, the implications of these patterns are significant. Committing an act of terrorism will usually involve local preparations. Although much of this conduct will not necessarily be criminal, early intelligence may give law enforcement the opportunity to stop the terrorists before an incident occurs. Knowledge of the threat — for example, understanding how long environmental or international terrorists prepare for their attacks — will affect the manner in which local officials respond. Identifying preparatory actions by environmental extremists may signal that an attack is imminent, whereas similar behavior by an international group might suggest that an attack is still several months away.



Understanding that most terrorists “act locally” can be important to know as investigative agencies seek to prevent terrorism and arrest perpetrators. These local patterns may be used by agencies to more efficiently

Cumulative Percentage of Preparatory Acts Over Time

Type of Terrorist Group	Incident day	Day before	2-3 days	4-7 days	8-14 days	15-30 days	1-3 mos	4-6 mos	7-12 mos	1-3 yrs	3+ yrs
International	5%	9%	13%	21%	32%	55%	68%	84%	89%	97%	100%
Right wing	15%	26%	31%	44%	49%	67%	94%	96%	96%	100%	
Environmental	20%	43%	72%	80%	91%	95%	98%	100%			
Left wing	50%	75%	88%	88%	88%	88%	100%				
All categories	13%	27%	40%	48%	57%	72%	85%	93%	95%	99%	100%

Percentage of acts completed within a specified time range:



patrol known, high-risk target areas and gather intelligence on suspected actions within a specific distance from potential targets. As we continue to deepen our understanding of the relationship among the location of the terrorist's home, terrorist preparation activities and the target, this growing knowledge should help officers prevent and respond to attacks.

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For More Information

- More information on this study is available at <http://trc.uark.edu>.
- For more information on NIJ's terrorism research, see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/terrorism>.

Notes

1. Wright, R., and S. Decker, *Burglars on the Job: Streetlife and Residential Break-ins*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994; Wright, R., and S. Decker, *Armed Robbers in Action: Stickups and Street Culture*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997; and Reppetto, T. A., *Residential Crime*, Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing, 1974.
2. "Pre-Incident Indicators of Terrorist Group Activities," NIJ Grant # 2003-DT-CX-0003; "Geospatial Analysis of Terrorist Activities: The Identification of Spatial and Temporal Patterns of Preparatory Behavior of International and Environmental Terrorists," NIJ Grant # 2005-IJ-CX-0200; and "Terrorism in Time and Space," NIJ Grant # 2006-IJ-CX-0037.
3. The members of the panel and their areas of expertise were: Ron Arnold, environmental

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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terrorism; Steve Chermak, right-wing terrorism; Kelly Damphousse, terrorism database management; William Dyson, domestic and international terrorism; Mark Hamm, right-wing terrorism; Robert Heibel, left-wing terrorism; Austin Turk, terrorism and political violence theory; and the author, Brent Smith, domestic and international terrorism.

4. Cases were selected primarily from the American Terrorism Study, a project that involves data collection on all persons indicted as a result of an FBI "terrorism enterprise" investigation as defined by the attorney general guidelines for domestic and international terrorism investigations.
5. Left-wing terrorist groups generally refer to those that adhere to a "forward-looking" ideology, one that advocates a political or social system that has not existed before in the U.S. Typically associated with extreme liberalism, examples include the May 19th Communist Party, the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army.
6. Right-wing terrorist groups generally refer to those that adhere to a "backward-looking" ideology, one that advocates a return to a political or social system that is perceived to have existed previously in the U.S. Typically associated with extreme conservatism, examples include the KKK, white supremacy groups like the Aryan Nations or groups like the Sheriff's Posse Comitatus that oppose centralized federal power.
7. Like the name implies, single-issue terrorist groups advocate on behalf of a particular political or social issue, such as anti-abortion or the environment.
8. "Geospatial Analysis of Terrorist Activities," NIJ Grant # 2005-IJ-CX-0200.
9. Temporal data on international terrorists are limited due to the small number of international incidents that have taken place in the U.S. Because of the FBI's success in disrupting plots, the number of cases is small.

About the Author

Brent Smith is a professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Arkansas. A student of terrorism for nearly 30 years, he created the American Terrorism Study in 1988 with assistance from the FBI. Smith currently serves as director of the Terrorism Research Center (TRC) in Fulbright College at the University of Arkansas. He was assisted on the projects discussed in the article by Kelly Damphousse, professor of sociology and associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oklahoma; Jackson Cothren, assistant professor of geosciences and affiliate of the Center for Advanced Spatial Technologies at the University of Arkansas; and Paxton Roberts, research associate at TRC.