Situational Awareness in Terrorism and Crime Prevention

by Glenn P. McGovern

Abstract

When governments raise the terrorist threat level and advise their citizens to be more alert to their surroundings: what precisely does that mean for the average citizen? When the warnings encompass vast regions, such as the United States or the European Union and lacks any definitive information on what exactly to be alert to: how is the average citizen supposed to prepare? This article explores the nature of these warnings and provides a set of guiding concepts, often used by professional law enforcement and other government agents, in order to provide a basic tool to the average citizen to reduce his or her chances of becoming a victim.

Introduction

As the tenth anniversary of the deadly September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks approaches, security perceptions in many countries have changed immensely. During those ten years the United Kingdom, Spain, Indonesia, India and a number of other countries have suffered their own large-scale terrorist attacks resulting in hundreds of lost lives. Two wars have been fought and continue on to this day, largely in the name of combating terrorism. Osama Bin Laden still enjoys his freedom, to a degree, while spewing out his messages of hate, serving to influence numerous other extremists. In response to these attacks and in view of the continuing threat of terrorist atrocities, many governments have developed security alert mechanisms, either color-coded or numerically-based in order to warn their citizens.

Many societies have been moving from situations of basic mutual trust to control measures and, as a consequence, conveniences taken for granted since World War II have been encroached upon, especially in the last decades. This has been most notable when traveling: passengers are requested to remove shoes, belts, jackets and metal items before boarding an aircraft and are subjected to special body scans and/or physical pat downs. We are no longer allowed to bring bottled water through airport security and most recently printer ink has been banned too. Some travel trajectories now require more in the way of documentation than previously needed. As a consequence, billions upon billions of dollars are being spent in the name of fighting terrorism. For the vast majority of the citizens of this Earth, these are inconveniences that are taken in stride as we recognize the reasoning behind it, even though they can be frustrating. Most of us go about their days working, providing for their families, and pursuing their goals oblivious to the terrorist threat. However, with each threatened, failed, foiled or completed new attack, the Western governments issue their warnings in their ongoing effort to protect their people. More
often than not, these warnings are followed by the inevitable statement advising each of us to be more alert to our surroundings.

While a logical statement, what exactly is meant by it? While it may be common sense to some, it has been said that common sense can be a most uncommon trait. In law enforcement and intelligence circles, being alert to one surroundings is more commonly referred to as “situational awareness”. Simply stated it means “being aware of what is occurring in your immediate area and recognizing a potential threat at an early enough stage to allow counter measures to be taken to avoid it.” It has been accurately described as the basic building block for those in law enforcement, military, intelligence professions. Based on it, advanced skills of surveillance detection, counter surveillance, operational security as well as behavioral profiling have been developed.

A person might be the best-trained, most experienced special operations warrior on the planet, but if he (or she) does not practice solid situational awareness, he might be as good as dead. The vast majority of the population will never have the hand-to-hand skills of a professional mixed martial arts fighter, or the weapons handling skills of a Delta Force or Special Air Service trooper. However, with a little practice, everyone can achieve basic situational awareness skills approaching those of a trained operator. Ironically, while it is one of the easiest skills to learn and implement, like common sense, it is the easiest to discard. Situational awareness essentially requires only practice to develop the habit of implementing it into one’s everyday life.

One of the key aspects one has to understand about situational awareness is that it is not about bravery or cowardice; rather it is about detection and avoidance. This becomes all the more critical when in the company of loved ones; they often represent an additional liability to you, a handicap if you will. While in a one-on-one situation, you may be able to handle the problem either by confrontation or by retreat, if there is more than one adversary and they are willing to target your family, you can find yourself in a very serious predicament.

**Threat Levels**

On March 11, 2002, the United States Government created the five level color-coded Threat Chart in order to provide its citizens with an easy to comprehend terrorist threat measurement. In recent years, this chart has fluctuated primarily between yellow (“Significant Risk of Terrorist Attacks”) and orange (“High Risk of Terrorist Attacks”). Only once has it hit red (“Severe Risk of Terrorist Attacks”). As of this writing the threat level stays at yellow, unless one is flying either domestically or internationally, whereupon the threat level is orange.

On August 1, 2006 the British Government established its own terrorist threat level indication system, also consisting of five levels, but not color-coded. In the last four years, it has fluctuated between level four (Severe - “Attack Highly Likely”) and level five (Critical - “Attack Expected Imminently”). As of this writing, the level has been set at Severe, especially in certain parts of the European Union. Interestingly, the Israeli Government has placed its country at a
state of emergency since the state of Israel came into existence in May 1948. However, when a possible terrorist event is believed to be imminent, or is in progress, Israel only raises the alert level in the city or region that is directly affected. Once the threat has either materialized or has passed away, the alert level is reduced for the area affected. This is important as it prevents the onset of complacency of the citizenry that comes with long periods of an enhanced alert status.

As recently as the autumn of 2010, Western Europe, the United States and Japan issued warnings of possible Al-Qaeda inspired terrorist attacks with the recommendation to be alert, i.e. to practice situational awareness. Short of having code word protected access to top secret intelligence information, the vast majority of citizens, including many in law enforcement, will not know the exact nature of the threat. When a government raises the warning level, there is almost never any direct information offered as to where, when and what type of attack is threatening to take place.

There are many reasons for this lack of specificity - from protection of sources, to prevention of general panic that could result from more specific information, to the details on the attack (place, time) simply not being available. If history is any guide, the attacks can take a multitude of forms. A suicide bomber on foot in a hotel lobby or on a subway station, a Mumbai-style running raid attack or a hostage taking scenario, a car bomb (vehicle-borne improvised explosive device) parked outside a restaurant.

For violent events, there are primarily two main categories. The first is the targeted attack where a specific individual or location is the focus of attack by a hostile person or organization. The second category is less specific: these are basically situations where victims happen to occur because they were at the proverbial “wrong place at the wrong time.” Situational awareness is most helpful in preventing or mitigating, to the extent possible, becoming a victim in those types of attacks.

Two concrete examples of situational awareness and the lack thereof: First, the recent killing of Hollywood publicist Ronni Chasen. On her way home from a movie’s first night followed by the after party, she was stopped at a traffic intersection in Beverly Hills, waiting to make a left turn. A lone man on a bike apparently attempted to rob her while she was in the car and only succeeded in shooting her five times. This was not a terrorist attack, or a government-sponsored assassination, this was a random event where two people from different walks of life crossed paths.[1]

Second example with an entirely different outcome: On January 27, 2011, in Lahore, Pakistan, CIA Contractor Raymond Davis while driving in his vehicle was attacked by two men on a motorcycle and at least one of them was armed with a firearm. Now, unlike the case with Ms. Chasen, Davis has since been identified as a former U.S. Army Special Forces soldier. With his high skills in the combat arts, he went on the offensive and killed the two hostiles.[2] However, sitting in a vehicle stuck in traffic and approached by a possible motorcycle-borne hit team is an extremely deadly situation for any individual regardless of training and experience. The point in
this case was that had Mr. Davis not be practicing situational awareness, he most likely would not have recognized a potential threat until it was too late for an effective response.

**Situational Awareness for the Average Citizen**

Consider that in the United States, the government is stating that there is a significant risk of a terrorist attack. This for a country that is 9.83 million square kilometers (3.79 square miles) in area (for the European Union it would mean an area that is 4.3 million square kilometers in size). What exactly does that mean for the couple enjoying a leisurely walk down the Champs-Élysées? What does it mean to the family visiting the Tower of London, or the millions of people of traveling each day to and from work in Madrid or Washington D.C.?

For all intents and purposes, it does not mean a thing to the citizens at large. They are more likely to fall victim to a vehicle collision or to street mugging than a terrorist event. However, what it does provide is the initial platform for assessing one’s situational awareness. One of the greatest benefits of situational awareness is that it is a tool that can - and should - be used daily against a range of potential threats. Perhaps the best simple analogy for it was coined by Scott Stewart in his article *A Primer on Situational Awareness*, wherein he referred to it as driving a vehicle and being alert to the other traffic. [3]

Those who commit hostile acts generally do so only after some careful planning. This is especially true for terrorist groups and criminal organizations. This well-documented process generally provides only two or three opportunities for detection. For the average citizen moving about the day, unless they are the unfortunate individual being targeted, most will not be in an area long enough and/or frequently enough to have the opportunity to detect something unusual during these initial stages of planning. For those happening to be unfortunate enough to be in an area about to be attacked, if a threat is detected, the amount of time available for a reaction would be severely limited as the most likely attack is underway.

Situational awareness is by its nature, a subtle art. It is practiced primarily with one’s eyes, scanning as one moves through the day the surroundings and the brain analyzing the visual input. It does not mean one should become paranoid of an attack at every street corner, behind every tree or building. At the same time it does not mean unusual events are dismissed outright. Situational awareness can and should be applied to all manner of threats, as we can never know when we will be attacked. It provides you, the citizen, with the opportunity to detect abnormal behavior or unusual activity that does not fit within the familiar environment.

The first concept to building situational awareness is accepting the fact that the world is a dangerous place. In some locations, depending on the political or socio-economic environment, it may be more dangerous than in others. You have to ask yourself, do I need to be at this particular location at this specific time? At times this is an easy decision to reach, especially when you are selecting whether or not to visit an area for business, study or vacation. The revolutionary turmoil currently being witnessed in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen are examples.
The second concept is to recognize that as the average citizen, you are not prepared to deal adequately with, or respond to, a terrorist attack. You lack the training, the armor, the weapons, the back-up and more to take effective action. Even for those in the military, intelligence and in law enforcement, when off-duty, even if armed, during an attack they are not armored, have no immediate means of communication beyond a cell phone, an quite possibly are unknown to the officially-designated first responders. Worst, and most importantly, police and security forces arriving at the scene may not know whether you are friend or foe.

Situational awareness is a mindset that a person must consciously employ every time they leave a location of relative safety, primarily one’s residence and one’s office. Individuals should move in a state of what is termed “relaxed awareness.” In this state you are alert to potential threats, but still able to engage in conversation, drive a vehicle, etc. - but without tuning out the world moving about in the immediate vicinity. The human body can support this level of alertness without suffering any mental and/or physical degradation.

While in a state of relaxed awareness, if an anomaly is detected, the individual then moves into what can be termed “focused awareness.” In this stage, the individual focuses on the abnormal behavior that first attracted his or her attention. This behavior can cover a broad spectrum, from a group of teenagers hanging around a street corner and up to no good, to a man wearing heavy clothing on a warm sunny day. The benefit of focusing on behavior rather than race or ethnicity is that it often allows one effectively to negate the issue of cultural differences; it lets one focus on the “what is wrong with the picture.”

Through this focused awareness, the individual has time to make a decision as to the potential threat being faced. If the anomaly is determined not to be threat, then the individual falls back into a state of relaxed awareness. However, should it be perceived to be a threat (regardless of whether it ultimately is found to be correct or not), the body falls into high alert and steps need to be taken to mitigate the threat to you and/or the family. This can be as simple as crossing the street, stepping into a store, to immediately driving away, contacting law enforcement, etc.. The principal concern for the average citizen should be to move away from the threat.

An important aspect of situational awareness is the understanding that in many terrorist attacks, you may not be in a position to see the threat prior to it being perpetrated. Traveling on mass transit, dining in restaurants, and staying in a hotel, all possible places of terrorist targeting, largely prevent a person of identifying a threat early enough to take action. Therefore, it is important to determine what steps can be taken to avoid being caught up in the “collateral damage.”

This can be a more difficult determination especially in areas that are not experiencing ongoing hostilities, but can and could be targeted in the future. If traveling on a train or subway system, where would a terrorist be most apt to strike? Analyzing the bombings that occurred in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2007, the explosive devices were positioned primarily toward the middle cars. Therefore, traveling in the front or tail car could reduce your chances of falling victim, at least to the extent of blast wave, fragmentation and shrapnel injuries.
When staying at a hotel, the ideal location to obtain a room is between the second and seventh floors, with the second and fourth being optimal. By being above the first floor, the likelihood of having your room burglarized and or your being assaulted are significantly lessened due to the difficulty in breaching second story and above windows and patios. By staying below the seventh floor (or sixth depending upon how they are numbered) the room is still within reach of a fire department’s ladders, in the event of a fire.

The second through fourth floors are the prime, as they provide the previous highlighted benefits, while adding two others. First of all, at between twenty and sixty feet off the ground, they provide a degree of buffer in the case of a vehicle borne explosive attack, and the resulting blast wave. The height is also close enough to the ground that an escape can be made, such as during an attack like that which occurred in Mumbai, India. Now ideally, in such a case, it is better to lockdown in place and await the arrival of responding police, but should it become necessary, escape is possible.

Here is where you need to think outside the box. From the third or fourth floor, the goal is to reduce the total amount of vertical distance that needs to be covered by freefall. Use of the below placed balconies is one avenue that can either be climbed directly, or reached through the use of bed linens and/or window curtains/drapes. Regardless, if a drop needs to be made from the fourth or fifth floor, it can be survivable. This is not to say a four-story fall will not hurt or cause injuries, but it can be done when all other options of safely escaping an area under attack have either failed or are not feasible.

An understanding of the nature of violent attacks, combined with a commitment of not going through one’s life oblivious of the events occurring around us, adds to ones’ overall confidence. This increased confidence level has been documented in and of itself as a factor of coping with and even preventing attacks. In 1981, a study titled *Attracting Assault – Victims’ Nonverbal Clues* was published.[4] It detailed the results of a study conducted by Betty Grayson and Morris Stein into how criminal predators (those involved in rape, murder, robbery and the like) selected their victims. The researchers videotaped busy pedestrian walkways in New York City, and then later showed the footage individually to the participating violent offenders. Within seconds these men started identifying potential victims. Interestingly, the individuals (i.e. potential victims) identified were largely consistent across the range of predator. The results revealed that when people move confidently, they can reduce their likelihood of being targeted and attacked substantially.

On February 14, 2006, Michael Chertoff, then Secretary of Homeland Security made the following statement: “In a free and open society, we simply cannot protect every person against every risk at every moment in every place. There is no perfect security...in order to protect our country and defend our freedoms; we must continue to focus our resources on the areas that pose the greatest risk.” Democratic governments, regardless of their political ideology, will generally take steps to protect their citizens. However, the law enforcement/security forces simply cannot
be everywhere at every moment. Terrorists and criminals know this and continued to use it their advantage.

Terrorists will carry out their attacks at locations that offer the best likelihood of success. Of late, these have increasingly been soft targets such as restaurants, hotels and public transportation systems. Hence, each and every person has a responsibility to provide to a degree, for their own protection and that of their loved ones. Situational awareness, while no panacea, can make the difference between becoming a victim or being a survivor. To some extent at least, the choice is yours.

About the author: Glenn P. McGovern has over two decades of law enforcement experience at the local, state and federal levels. He has thirteen years of experience in SWAT and special operations and was, for three years, assigned to international terrorism investigations. He is the author of Targeted Violence (CRC Press 2010) and Protective Operations (CRC Press 2011).

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