STARTᐅᐅ National Consortium for the
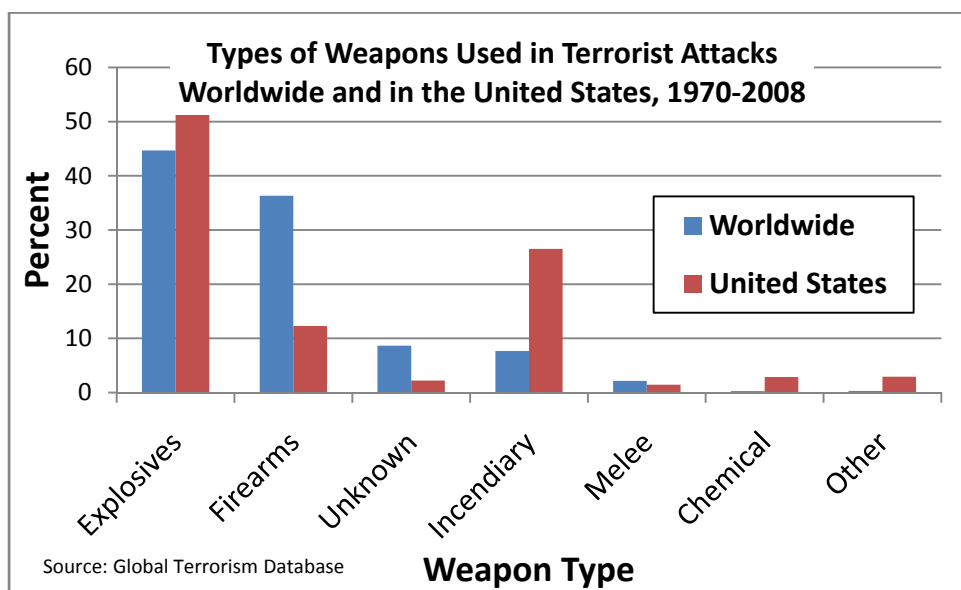Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

Background Report: Package Bombs on Cargo Planes
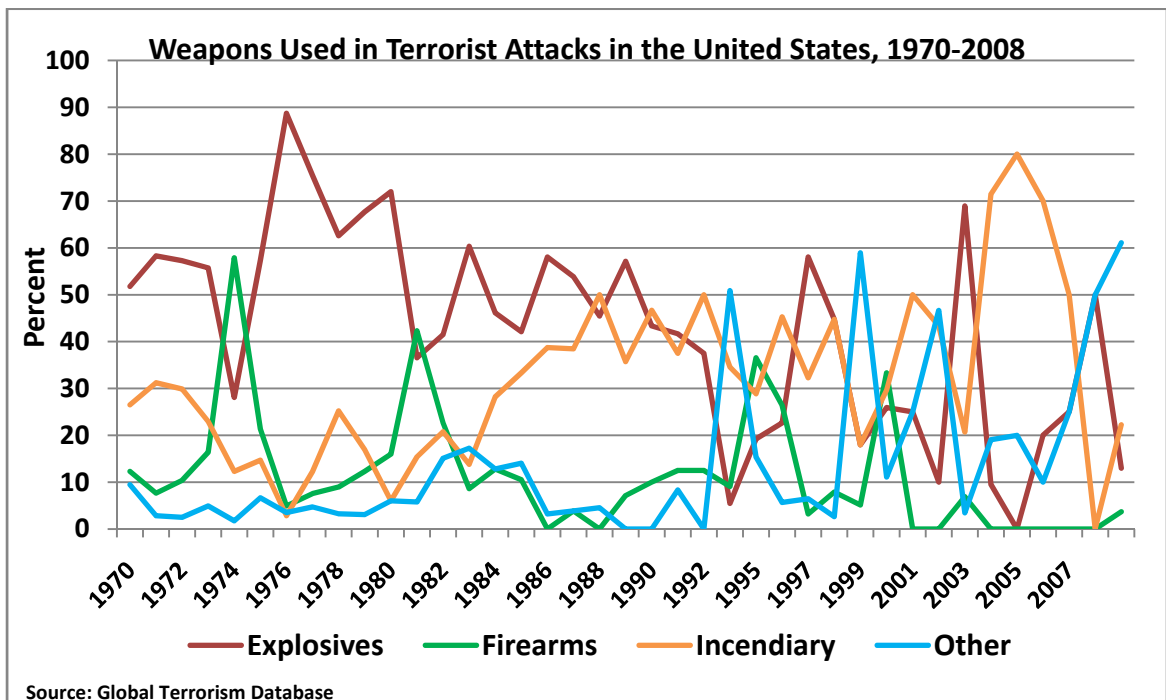## November 1, 2010

Following the discovery of two suspicious packages containing explosive materials on cargo flights ultimately bound for Chicago, Illinois, START has compiled background information on terrorist activity involving explosives and the use of package and letter bombs, attack patterns in Chicago and the United States, and attacks against religious and airline targets.

- TERRORISTS' USE OF EXPLOSIVES

  In the United States and around the world, explosives are the type of weapon most commonly used in terrorist attacks. In fact, some type of explosive device was used in 45% of all terrorist attacks worldwide between 1970 and 2008. The United States experienced more than 1100 terrorist attacks involving explosives during that period, with this weapon type being used in more than half of all terrorist attacks in the United States.

Types of Weapons Used in Terrorist Attacks Worldwide and in the United States, 1970-2008
Source: Global Terrorism Database

However, the prevalence of explosives in terrorist attacks in the United States has dropped dramatically in recent years, from over 60% in the 1970s to just under 25% in the 2000s. During the same time period the prevalence of incendiary weapons, including arson, in terrorist attacks in the United States has increased 160%.

START Background Report, November 2010

Weapons Used in Terrorist Attacks in the United States, 1970-2008

Out of over 1100 attacks using explosives in the United States since 1970, forty-three involved letter or package bombs. This includes those sent to various educational institutions and airlines by Theodore Kaczynski, known as the Unabomber, between 1978 and 1995. Letter bomb attacks are rarely lethal, causing a fatality in only 12% of U.S. cases. The targets in these attacks are most frequently government targets, but have also included private citizens and property, educational institutions, businesses, and—as in the recent Chicago case—religious figures and institutions.

The perpetrators of letter bomb attacks in the United States are frequently unidentified, however groups that have been attributed responsibility for these attacks come from a wide variety of ideological backgrounds. These organizations include Black September, Independent Armed Revolutionary Commandos (CRIA), International Committee against Nazism, and the Irish Republican Army.

Police reports indicate that the explosive materials intended to arrive in Chicago were contained within ink cartridges of computer printers. This type of weapon is classified as an improvised explosive device (IED). Of the 1100+ terrorist attacks using explosives in the United States, START researchers have identified 168 incidents in which terrorists used IEDs within the United States, causing 188 deaths and more than 540 injuries since 1970. (For more on IEDs, see Legault and LaFree, 2009: http://www.start.umd.edu/start/publications/IED_Revised_Brief_20091109.pdf)

- TARGETING AIRPLANES WITH EXPLOSIVES
  According to the latest reports, both U.S. and British officials suspect that the explosive devices were meant to detonate while on the planes, rather than at the Chicago destinations. Furthermore, authorities report that at least one of the packages flew on passenger flights before it was discovered. Over 600 attacks worldwide since 1970 have used explosives to target airports and airlines. At least 75% of these attacks caused no fatalities, however a small percentage have been extremely lethal. These cases include the 1985 attack on Air India flight 182 in which Sikh extremists killed 329; the 1988 bombing of Pan American flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270; and the 1989 bombing of UTA flight 772, which killed 170. The most lethal recent attacks involving explosives on planes are the coordinated bombings of Sibir and Volga-Aviaexpress flights in 2004, which killed 90. Responsibility for these attacks was claimed by the previously unknown "Islambouli Brigades of al-Qa'ida." Recently, there have also been several thwarted attacks of this nature, including those perpetrated by Richard Reid in 2001, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab in 2009.

  Although there have been incidents where cargo planes (typically carrying aid) were shot down by missiles, as well as cases where cargo buildings at airports have been bombed, there is no record in the Global Terrorism Database of cargo planes being attacked by explosives detonated while onboard the flight.

- AL QA'IDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA (AQAP)
  The sophisticated explosives on the cargo planes originated in Yemen, and initial reports implicate al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as responsible for the attempted attack. Although AQAP is a relatively new group, their attacks as well as those by their predecessor, al Qa'ida in Yemen (AQY), are frequently very lethal.

  Since the mid-2000s, AQAP (and AQY before it) has used a variety of tactics in its terrorist activity, with attacks involving armed assaults and hostage taking as well as use of explosives and bombs. The attempted bombings in question appear to have been intended as a coordinated attack—a common characteristic of attacks by al-Qa'ida and its affiliated groups.

- TERRORIST ACTIVITY IN CHICAGO
  Early reports indicated that the packages in question were addressed to synagogues in Chicago, Illinois. Chicago is ranked sixth among U.S. cities in terms of frequency of terrorist attacks, behind New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami, and Washington, D.C.

Top 10 U.S. Cities: Percent of Terrorist Attacks	
City	**Percent of U.S. Attacks**
New York	18.68
Los Angeles	4.86
San Francisco	4.42
Miami	4.15
Washington	3.36
Chicago	2.61
Berkeley	1.46
Seattle	1.41
Oakland	0.88
San Diego	0.88
Source: Global Terrorism Database	

In a pattern similar to that of the United States in general, the vast majority (over 80%) of terrorist attacks in Chicago occurred during the 1970s. Terrorist attacks in Chicago have targeted primarily government and business targets (in over half of all cases), while police and military targets make up approximately 10% of all attacks in Chicago. To date, terrorist attacks targeting religious institutions in the Chicago area have been extremely rare.

Terrorist attacks in and around Chicago have involved a wide-range of ideologically diverse perpetrators. Terrorist activity in the 1970s was dominated by the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional (FALN), a Puerto Rican separatist group, as well as by attacks by both Black nationalists and White extremists.

Most terrorist attacks in Chicago have been non-lethal, with the exceptions of three police officers killed by Black nationalists in 1970 and a Serbian journalist who was killed in 1977.

- RELIGIOUS TARGETS IN THE UNITED STATES
  Since 1970, the most common types of targets in the United States have been business (25%), government (12%), private citizens and property (11%), and abortion-related targets (11%). Religious figures and institutions have been targeted in 3.4% of attacks in the United States. These incidents have targeted churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and religious community centers and leaders.

  Forty percent of these attacks involved the use of incendiary devices, 35% involved explosives, and in 12% the perpetrators used firearms. Twenty people have been killed in attacks against religious targets in the United States. Four attacks, all against Christian Evangelists, have involved letter or package bombs. These attacks did not cause any fatalities.

These data were collected and compiled from the **Global Terrorism Database** (**GTD,** www.start.umd.edu/gtd)**.** The GTD contains information on more than 87,000 terrorist incidents that have occurred around the world since 1970. An updated version of the database, with information on incidents through 2008, was released in May 2010.

GTD is a project of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. START, based at the University of Maryland, College Park, aims to provide timely guidance on how to disrupt terrorist networks, reduce the incidence of terrorism, and enhance the resilience of U.S. society in the face of the terrorist threat. The material presented here is the product of START and does not express the official opinion of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Additional information on START is available at: www.start.umd.edu.

For additional information on this release or the GTD, please contact START at 301.405.6600 or gtd@start.umd.edu. For more urgent media requests, please use www.start.umd.edu/start/media/contact/.

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