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Cold Comfort: The Latest Attacks on America Follow a Familiar Playbook

COMMENTARY

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Law enforcement agencies near Bourbon Street, where a vehicle drove into a crowd and killed at least 14 people, in New Orleans, Louisiana, January 1, 2025

Photo by Hyosub Shin/The Atlanta Journal-Constitution/TNS/ABACA

By [Brian Michael Jenkins](#) and Bruce Butterworth

This commentary originally appeared on [The Hill](#) on January 3, 2025.

The tragic pickup truck ramming [in New Orleans](#) and the subsequent explosion of a Tesla Cybertruck [in Las Vegas](#) remind us that terrorist threats remain a deadly reality in the United States.

There are no indications yet that the two attacks were coordinated. More likely, they are coincidental, although that will not prevent linking them to advance political agendas or conspiracy theories. The coincidence contributes to greater public apprehension.

In the coming days, we will learn more about the perpetrators—motivation, collaborators, funding. For now, it is clear that the New Orleans attack was intended to cause high casualties. [It did](#).

The attack in Las Vegas [resulted in](#) the death of the driver and injuries to bystanders, but the vehicle used (manufactured by Tesla) and the venue chosen (a Trump Hotel) suggest a political message.

Both attacks were premeditated, indicated by advanced preparations. The attacker in New Orleans rented a vehicle, acquired firearms, and built explosive devices. [The FBI believes](#) they worked alone.

The Las Vegas attack also involved the rental of a vehicle, reportedly through [the same peer-to-peer app](#), packing it with some form of explosive or incendiary material, and detonating it at a symbolic location. This could also be accomplished by a single individual, but we shall see if others were involved.

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According to research on vehicle [ramming attacks](#) we carried out at the Mineta Transportation Institute, the first one occurred in 1964 when an angry bus driver drove his vehicle, running down people in Taipei, but there may well have been vehicle attacks before then.

In 1973, a mentally unstable woman living in Czechoslovakia decided to take revenge for the hatred she felt from society and her family. She rammed a truck into people waiting for a tram in Prague, killing eight and injuring 12.

These were and remain rare events. None of the myriad of terrorist groups that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s employed the tactic.

[Vehicle ramming \(PDF\)](#) became a terrorist tactic in the 1990s when Palestinian drivers began targeting off-duty Israeli soldiers waiting at bus stops. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad called for vehicle ramming attacks, which began to increase in the 2000s, climbing sharply after 2014. By 2016, they had become the second-most common and second-deadliest form of attack in Israel. Historically, both al Qaeda and ISIS also exhorted their followers to carry out vehicle ramming attacks. In 2010, an online magazine published by al Qaeda suggested using a vehicle as a [“mowing machine”](#) to mow down the enemies of Allah.

The author of the article advised attackers to choose a pick-up truck, preferably with four-wheel drive, select a pedestrian-only location, aim for the crowd, and accelerate. The article also described modifying the vehicle by attaching steel blades to the grill to slice through its [victims](#). None of the ramming attacks have seen such a modification.

ISIS published a similar article in 2016, with equally [grisly language \(PDF\)](#). The “crusaders” would be demoralized by “vehicles that unexpectedly mount their busy sidewalks, smashing into crowds, crushing bones, and severing limbs.”

The ISIS article appeared four months after the deadliest jihadist vehicle ramming attack in [Nice, France](#), when a driver plowed a heavy cargo truck through a crowd watching Bastille Day fireworks, killing 86 and injuring hundreds on July 14, 2016.

The attack in Nice, more than jihadist exhortations, inspired others, [reflecting a contagion effect](#). Vehicle ramming attacks come in clusters. The planning for the New Orleans attack, however, is likely to have preceded the Dec. 21 vehicle ramming attack in [Magdeburg, Germany](#), which killed five.

German authorities say that the driver in that case shows signs of mental [illness](#). If we exclude attacks in Israel and the Palestinian territories, official statements and media accounts suggest that confirmed or possibly mentally disturbed individuals account for more than 40 percent of the attackers. They also account for nearly half of the total fatalities.

According to [our data \(PDF\)](#), right-wing extremists appear in 20 percent of the cases but have caused less than 5 percent of the fatalities. Individuals inspired by jihadist ideologies account for just eight percent of the attacks, but more than a quarter of the fatalities. The lines between the categories,

however, are blurry with attackers often displaying a mix of personal problems and ideological fervor.

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Unlike other forms of terrorist attack, most of which occur in conflict zones in the developing world, most vehicle ramming attacks occur in developed countries—Europe and the United States account for nearly three-quarters of the attacks and almost half of the fatalities.

Roughly half of all vehicle ramming attacks have occurred in the United States alone, but these account for only nine percent of the fatalities, owing to the many ramming attacks that occurred during the Black Lives Matter [protests](#). Fifteen deaths (including the driver) in the New Orleans attack surpass the eight killed in the [2017 Bike Path attack](#) in New York, which was also ISIS-inspired.

China accounts for [11 percent \(PDF\)](#) of the attacks and 40 percent of the fatalities. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom together account for about 15 percent of the attacks and 43 percent of the fatalities.

More than half of the attackers use their own or a family vehicle; in other cases, the vehicle is stolen. In [5 percent \(PDF\)](#) of the cases, the vehicle is rented. Attacks involving rental vehicles, however, are the most lethal, accounting for more than a quarter of the total fatalities. Rental vehicles reflect prior planning, and that renters are able to acquire larger vehicles.

Just about all of the elements of the New Orleans attack have been seen before: the use of a rental vehicle, an attack on pedestrians gathered for a public event, the additional use of firearms and explosives, the driver killed in a final confrontation with police.

The vehicle explosion in Las Vegas also has ample precedents. In 2007, police found two vehicles that had been parked outside of nightclubs in London to

be loaded with explosives. The next day, two of the perpetrators crashed a Jeep filled with propane canisters into the Glasgow airport terminal.

[In 2010](#), a jihadist parked an SUV packed with incendiaries in New York's Times Square. In 2020, a massive bomb contained in an RV parked in downtown Nashville, Tenn., detonated, killing the bomb-maker and injuring eight people. The motives for the attack were not clear, but as in many such cases, it may have included a combination of factors.

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Uncertainty prevails. Security will be increased for the upcoming events in Washington D.C.—the Jan. 6 congressional count of the electoral votes, former President Carter's funeral, and the inaugural ceremonies. Security will also be heavy at major sporting events—the Bowl games, the ongoing college football playoffs, and the upcoming NFL playoffs.

Meanwhile, social media will no doubt fuel rumors, accusations, and conspiracy theories. That we have been here before and persevered is a source of cold comfort to those fearful today.

More About This Commentary

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