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ANOTHER ATTACK ON A HOTEL IN AFRICA

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There has been yet another attack on a hotel in Africa, this time in Mogadishu – again. A suicide bomber first detonated a car with explosives at the gate of the Naso-Hablod Hotel, after which the attackers moved into the hotel shooting wildly at guests and staff, according to officials. This is just three weeks after another attack on another hotel in Mogadishu, the Ambassador Hotel.

And the roll call of attacks goes on – the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, the Radisson Blu in Bamako, the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli, the Grand Bassam resort in Cote d’Ivoire – all in the last 18 months. In Pakistan, Indonesia, Jordan, Afghanistan, India, hotels have been targets for terrorist attacks. None more so than the Europa Hotel in Belfast, Northern Ireland, which is known as the “most bombed hotel in the world”, having been attacked no fewer than 28 times during the Troubles.

Why are hotels such “favoured” targets? They’re certainly not the only targets, as attacks on airports, subways and markets prove, but the attacks on hotels certainly get a lot of attention from government, and from the press. And that’s partly why they get attacked, because in developed countries they tend to be where Westerners and government officials gather, and in some cases, particularly the attacks in Bamako, Indonesia, Pakistan and Jordan, the hotels have “American” brand names.

In Mogadishu, the attacks are specifically against hotels “frequented by the apostate government members” according to al-Shabab quoted in Reuters.

Hotels are easy targets for terrorists. They are public places, the owners and management want them to be easily accessible to the public so they can attract people to spend there. Turning a hotel into a fortress is hardly likely to be good for business (although, in places such as Mogadishu, it may well be what potential guests want). So hotels are also easy for the pre-attack reconnoitre, those planning the actual attack able to look for the weak points.

These attacks have multiple impacts. The deaths, the casualties, the psychological trauma suffered by witnesses and families, those are the most direct ones. The impact on the economy can be severe, with Tunisia’s tourist industry decimated, at least in the short-term, as the destination itself is negatively affected – the beach attacked at Sousse remain empty today. Investors are deterred from countries considered unsafe. The target hotel, of course, suffers hugely, from the physical damage and loss of reputation, both of which hit revenues – and for a chain hotel, that can have a knock-on effect on others bearing the same brand, particularly those in similar locations.



So what, if anything, can be done by a hotel owner and management to prevent this happening to them?

Well, a hotel is very rarely attacked because of anything it has done itself to prompt the attack (although in Mogadishu it is the specific guests that the hotels catered for – government officials and politicians – that were the target), it is chosen more for the propaganda value. So the attack is likely to happen anyway, somewhere, and therefore (say this quietly) the aim is to ensure that that attack is on someone else, not you. But if everyone has the same intention, then attacks can be prevented.

I was speaking to Mac Segal, Senior Security Consultant at AS Solution about this increase in attacks on hotels, and asked him the same question, what can hotel owners do? He was adamant that, whilst cameras, baggage screeners and metal detectors are part of the answer, more cameras are not, and that is where many owners are making a mistake. Sure, the visual impact of screening at hotel entrances is essential, to make guests feel safe, and as a deterrent to potential attackers. “But”, he remarked “there is a big difference between feeling safe and being safe”.

Investing in security measures is an imperative, in every hotel, everywhere in the world – we have already seen how the terrorists can reach into Paris and Brussels, to name just two cities in the developed world. Nowhere is immune. And whilst owners have a legal and moral obligation to keep their guests, visitors and employees safe, investing in security is also a sound business decision.

We live in a litigious world. Litigation breeds litigation, as those impacted by an event, physically or mentally, will seek someone to compensate them. Companies using hotels around the world, but particularly those from the USA booking their staff, suppliers and others into hotels in Africa, including airlines, will no longer accept the brand’s promises, or a certificate from a security firm, at face value. They will send their own assessors into a hotel to look at all aspects of security, front and back of house, not just those intended to deter terrorist attacks, but also safety of the guest in their bedrooms, including the integrity of the door-locking software. And if they are not happy – they will not use that hotel. Period. Your business will suffer, in the same way as if you don’t offer beds, water, Wi-Fi.....

And as I said before, this is not a question of counting the number of cameras or scanners. They will look also at policies and procedures, which will include the training of the security and other staff. All staff should be regarded as security operatives – from the housekeepers reporting odd behaviour by guests in their rooms, to front desk clerks and luggage porters also looking at body language. But they cannot do this if they are not trained, and if they don’t have “ownership” in protecting the hotel asset (including its future business).

Many hotels I have been to subcontract out their security personnel to a third party company. There are good reasons for doing that, but as a rule they are low paid, uneducated and untrained



people, put into a uniform and told to “watch the gate”. They are not seen as staff of the hotel, and treated as outsiders – as a hotel owner, when did you ever invite your third party security operatives to the staff party? When the proverbial hits the fan, more than likely they will be in self-preservation mode, and nothing else.

Feeling safe, being safe. So your car is searched when you entered the hotel gate – is it ever done properly? They look under the bonnet, in the trunk, under the chassis. Hello, the bomb’s on the floor by my feet! Wanna take a look at it?

Being safe means carrying out checks properly (get used to it, travellers, it’s never going to get any better, if you have nothing to hide, then respect what the hotel is doing to protect your safety). Being safe means using technology, for sure, but it also means investing in people, hiring people who specialise in hotel security, and training everyone in security procedures. Look at the guy in front of the screen at the scanner – what is he going to do when he sees an AK47 or a bomb in the luggage of the guest in front of you? What confidence do you have that he will react properly, and not freak out? As a paying guest, you have a right to know that you are safe.

Mac Segal again “The required shift in the hotel security paradigm is conspicuously absent – it is people that will prevent future attacks, not guns and scanners.”

These days, security of a hotel is as important as, well, beds, water and Wi-Fi! Why shouldn’t you tell the guest about the investment you have made, in people as well as equipment? Google for the big chains’ security policies, and they’re more likely to talk about data security than physical security. Sure, you’re not going to tell the world everything, for obvious reasons some of your security measures need to be confidential. But telling me you have security cameras does not make me feel even a little bit safe. Tell me how much training you carry out each month on security measures, and I will look at your staff in a different way, knowing that because of them I am safe.

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