

The logo features the word "EUROPOL" in blue, uppercase letters. To the right of the text is a stylized graphic of yellow lightning bolts striking downwards, set against a dark blue circular background.

EUROPOL

The concealment of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in rectal cavities

SC5 - Counter Terrorism Unit

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. BACKGROUND ON SUICIDE ATTACK	3
3. MODUS OPERANDI OF THE SUICIDE ATTACK	5
4. EUROPOL'S ASSESSMENT	6
5. CONCLUSIONS.....	10

1. INTRODUCTION

On 27 August 2009, at about 23:30 hours (local time), in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) a suicide bomber tried to assassinate the Assistant Interior Minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef.

Muhammad, who is also the son of the country's Interior Minister, was lightly injured in the attack.

According to several media worldwide, the suicide bomber had hidden the improvised explosive device (IED) in his rectum and activated it once close to the Prince.

This briefing aims to assess the possible use of a new modus operandi for suicide bombings, despite the fact that it was not possible to officially confirm the hypothesis about the place of the IED's concealment and the means used for its activation.



2. BACKGROUND ON SUICIDE ATTACK

Prince Muhammad bin Nayef is the Saudi Assistant Interior Minister and has been actively involved in the formulation of Saudi Arabia's counter terrorism policy since 2003, when al-Qaeda attacked Saudi Arabia for the first time.

On the day of the suicide attack, the Prince was receiving guests to a Ramadan greetings event at his office in Jeddah, which is common practice among the Royal Saudi family.

The suicide bomber was a well-known Saudi terrorist belonging to the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), operating in Yemen; the perpetrator had claimed that he had renounced terrorism and wanted to be reintegrated in Saudi Arabia.

Open sources reported that the attacker, Abdullah Hassan Talea' Asiri, a wanted Saudi militant who had been hiding in Yemen, got in touch with the Saudi authorities telling them he wanted to turn himself in to Prince Muhammad bin Naif.

After arriving back in Saudi Arabia, Asiri spoke to Prince Muhammad on the phone; the prince agreed to see him during a Ramadan reception at his home in the city of Jeddah.

During the phone call, the men exchanged greetings and discussed the importance of the holy month of Ramadan. Later in the conversation, Asiri asked if a special plane could be dispatched to take him to the meeting with Prince Muhammad.

Asiri, escorted by security, was transported to Jeddah, where he met with the prince at his palace.

During the meeting with the prince, Asiri activated the explosive charge and blew himself up; initially there was no more information available although further details of what happened in the moments prior to the explosion were released later on. The terrorist died and the prince was the only person injured in the terrorist attack. The impact on the prince was not serious, as was apparent during a public appearance on TV later: he was just wearing a band aid strip and a bandage on a couple of fingers.



Photo: The Prince after the attack on 28 August 2009

The action was claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) on the same day. The claim identified the suicide bomber as a terrorist wanted by the Saudi authorities. The (translated) AQAP claim reads as follows:

“In the name of Allah, the most merciful, the most compassionate.

A statement claiming responsibility for the attempted assassination of the Tyrant Muhammad bin Nayef al-Saud. In a sophisticated operation and security breach which is the first of its time in the Arabian Peninsula, we have targeted the Deputy Interior Minister of security matters, the tyrant and criminal Muhammad bin Nayef al-Saud, who has waged war against Allah, his messenger, and his

faithful servants, and he is among the evildoers. As you know, the courageous brother mujahidin, the martyred fugitive from the 85 most wanted list, “Abu Al-Khayr”, Abdullah Hassan Taleh Aseri by the grace and power of Allah was able to enter Nayef’s palace and circulate amongst his bodyguards, thereupon igniting his explosive device – we will not disclose how it was made or the method of detonation- after he passes through all the checkpoints in Najran and Jeddah airports, and was transferred aboard the plane that belongs to the aforementioned Nayef.”

3. MODUS OPERANDI OF THE SUICIDE ATTACK

Certain aspects of AQAP’s claim of responsibility are relevant in relation with the terrorist operation. The first point is its qualification as a “sophisticated operation”, which implies a degree of “sophistication” in that it allowed the perpetrator to reach the prince after having undergone surely rigorous security checks.

Allegedly, prior to meeting the prince, the terrorist spent over 30 hours with the Saudi security services, and passed through several security checks as part of his transport from Yemen to Saudi Arabia; and even at the checkpoints established to search all those approaching the prince.

Photo: Abdullah Hassan Talea’ Asiri (suicide bomber)



Assuming that the hypothesis that the IED was concealed inside the bomber’s is correct—following a modus operandi that has been used by drugs traffickers and prisoners to conceal different items--the device would have to have either been ingested or hidden in the perpetrator’s rectum. Ingestion does not appear likely, mainly because of the inherent access difficulties—e.g. should the operation have been aborted. There is also a marked difficulty in swallowing an object (like an IED) which could obstruct the breathing channels. The most probable alternative is that the device had been inserted into the attacker’s rectum.

Concealment items in the rectum is a very common *modus operandi* used for smuggling of illicit materials, as mentioned before, so it could be a perfect location for the transport of explosives up to several dozens of grams, depending on the density of the explosive material. Preservatives are commonly used for drug smuggling in rectal and vaginal cavities; they have also been used by terrorists in the constructions of IEDs for isolating different materials/components.

The explosive, together with other required components for its activation, could have been hidden as previously described and protected by the latex of preservatives.

4. EUROPOL'S ASSESSMENT

Assuming that the hypothesis that the IED was carried in the attacker's rectum is correct, we will try to assess the feasibility of activating a device concealed within a cavity of the human body.

We will depart from the assumption that the device was activated electronically, since the probability of a pyrotechnic activation is low.

Several activation methods are mainly used for the activation of IEDs:

1. SWITCH: The most commonly known method for the activation of IEDs carried by suicide bombers is the use of manually handled switches. The closure of the switch by the suicide bomber guarantees that the explosion takes place at the best moment to either strike a selected target or inflict the largest possible amount of casualties. Initially it would be the logical activation method in a conventional suicide attack; however, switches used by suicide bombers are connected to wires. In this particular case, the wires would have to protrude from the rectum and be in the bomber's hands, therefore being visible.

Photo: Switch used by suicide bombers in Amman (Jordan) terrorist attacks on 9th November 2008



Another possibility, assuming the use of a switch as described above, would be that the introduction of the device is made by modules, the switch being the last component introduced. If enough length of wire is provided, it would be possible to extract the switch from its location at a time when the security services and the target are distracted and activate the charge.

2. **TIMER:** The use of timers is common either for static targets that will not change their location or for actions assessed to be successful within a range of time, like a planned visit of a VIP to a location. The bomber was not in a position to assess the exact moment at which he would be facing his target; this option, therefore, does not appear to be a credible hypothesis.
3. **RC:** The use of a radio controlled IED is another hypothesis that has been assessed, RC referring to the use of any kind of radiofrequency controlled device like servos, DTMFs, GSM circuit boards, etc. The electronic components required to build an RCIED would be of relatively small volume, although this procedure presents several cons.

The transmitter would not require to be operated by the suicide bomber, but some kind of visual contact with the crime scene would be required to identify the appropriate moment for activation. This system could be ineffective due to the need of an antenna for the reception of the signal from the transmitter and the impossibility of presenting the antenna outside of the concealment location. The human body itself could act as a shield for the reception of the activation signal.

4. **ANTI-MOVEMENT:** Anti-Movement switches are usually placed in IEDs that remain static; they lead to the activation of the device as soon as it moves from its rest position. Usually based in ball bearings or mercury bubbles, these switches close the circuit as far as the movement or inclination of the switch is enough, according to its level of sensibility. Another hypothesis could be the existence of a home-made anti-movement switch with high insensibility, inserted in the rectum, which would close the circuit if the suicide bomber lays on the floor or in certain position predefined and planned. This hypothesis could be plausible for a short journey of the suicide bomber but it is less credible to have been used in the above mentioned action.

The Saudi Arabia Ministry of Interior stated some days after the attack that the suicide bomber blew up while the prince was on the phone reassuring that another Saudi militant present in Yemen would surrender like the bomber. It would appear that, during the meeting, Asiri explained to Muhammad that other Saudi militants in Yemen also wished to surrender but sought reassurances from the prince.

A call was then placed to one of the militants in Yemen. While the prince was on the phone, Asiri blew up. If this version released by the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Interior is true, it would clearly point to a remotely operated device.

The terrorist could have known through this phone call that the suicide bomber was close to the prince at that moment and then remotely activated the charge, through a Time Power Unit (TPU) integrating a SIM card or any other kind of radio frequency operated receiver. Another hypothesis put forward by Europol's Counter-Terrorism unit could be the direct activation of

the charge by the prince by the fact of dialling a certain phone number, provided by the terrorist, which could be integrated in the device.

There are alleged precedents in Pakistan of suicide bombers being remotely blown up; also interesting was the killing of Hamas commander Yahya Ayyash in 1996, who was using an operational mobile phone that caused his head to explode once he had identified himself on the phone.

The fact that the prince's injuries were so light and the fact that no one else was injured are proof of the blast's low effects. Conventional suicide bombers' belts or vests are attached externally and usually are reinforced through the use of shrapnel, e.g. ball bearings, chains and other materials. If we accept the hypothesis of a device concealed in the rectum, it would explain the results of the explosion: the amount of explosive would be small although enough to kill the bomber but the body itself would act as a shield for the expansion of the explosive wave, amortising its effects. In the pictures presented below, there is clear lack of shrapnel projections in the walls; the suicide bomber is seen missing the lower half of his body which discounts the use of a common suicide vest.



Photo: Suicide bomber torso (Picture 1)



Photo: Suicide bomber torso (Picture 2)



Photo: Crime scene after the suicide bomb attack

There are precedents of the use of dead cattle for the concealment of IEDs, like donkeys and sheep in the West Bank and Gaza, and even of the use of dead bodies as “booby-traps” during WWII, but there is no record of human beings concealing fully operational IEDs in their body cavities.

Europol do not have in place a cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia, but the analysis of the scene and autopsy of the body would allow to recreate the IED used in the attack and subsequently to clearly identify the modus operandi.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The research done for this report leads to the following conclusions:

- It would be possible to explode a device concealed in the rectum.
- The activation by radiofrequency seems to be the modus operandi for this terrorist attack.
- Concealing an IED in the rectum would limit the amount of explosive available, due to the reduced volume of space available and the need of an activation mechanism to be concealed in the same location.

Should there be conclusive proof that the attack took place with an IED concealed inside the perpetrator's body, it would definitely have an impact in aviation safety and the current standard operational procedures in place should be reviewed. Passengers are screened through metal detectors, in some airports even through explosive detectors, but the sensitivity and power of these machines would need to be increased or reviewed, in order to overcome shielding of the device by the human body.