

1998 U.S. Embassy Bombings in East Africa

On August 7, 1998, the U.S. Embassies in Tanzania and Kenya were almost simultaneously attacked. One car bomb was detonated at each site, resulting in massive casualties and injuries of both embassy staff and local civilians. A total of 213 people were killed, of whom 44 were American Embassy employees (12 Americans and 32 Foreign Service National employees). Ten Americans and eleven FSNs were seriously injured, as were an estimated 4,000 Kenyan civilians. The U.S. Department of State responded quickly by dispatching special teams to the region to assist with rescue and recovery and by issuing a travel advisory to all U.S. citizens abroad. An intense investigation ensued and on August 20, 1998, President Clinton authorized Operation Infinite Reach. The mission was a retaliatory missile attack on the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical company in Sudan and Al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan.

This crisis is important because the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania changed the way the U.S. Government perceived the threat of terrorism. It was significant because the size of the bomb served as a warning signal to U.S. intelligence of the potential damage terrorists could cause. Not only were the bombings a direct attack on the U.S., but the coordination of the almost simultaneous attacks revealed the ability, reach, and determination of the terrorists. Diana Keller studied this crisis in 2007.



Damaged cars and debris cover the ground outside the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, Friday Aug. 7, 1998, after a huge bomb explosion ripped apart a building and damaged the American Embassy in background, killing dozens of people and injuring some 400 people. (AP Photo/Sayyid Azim)

While the American media and public were distracted by sexual scandals, the international intelligence community had been slowly becoming more aware of the increased danger of terrorist organizations worldwide.

Occasions for Decision

- How should the immediate safety of U.S. citizens be ensured? This decision necessitated a humanitarian intervention responding to an immediate need, and required logistic rather than policy considerations: The State Department dispatched special teams to the region to assist with rescue and recovery and issued a travel advisory to all U.S. citizens abroad.
- How should the U.S. respond to the attack of its embassies in East Africa? Pres. Clinton authorized Operation Infinite Reach, a retaliatory missile attack. This decision is further analyzed below as the major policy decision.
- Who should be notified about the planned operation? This was a minor policy consideration tangential to the second occasion for decision.

Under the Shadow of Scandal

Throughout the spring and summer of 1998, the Republican controlled U.S. House of Representatives began an impeachment investigation of President Clinton for lying under oath about the nature of his relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky. Accusations were rampant that President Clinton was using the embassy bombings to distract attention from the Lewinsky scandal. Any action taken by Clinton in response to the bombings was thus shadowed by the personal scandal and his possible impeachment.

- How should the American public be notified about the counter attack? This is also a minor policy consideration tangential to occasion for decision number 2.

Decision Making Amidst Distraction

In the days following the bombings, President William Jefferson Clinton considered his options. On the advice of his national security team, he finally approved the option of a missile attack. Operation Infinite Reach was intended to strike vital holdings of Al Qaeda as well as kill high-level terrorist leaders who planned to attend a meeting in Khost, including Bin Laden. It is worthy to note that technically Congress was not aware of the President's plans for Operation Infinite Reach until they were well established. However, he received support from both sides of the aisle. Though most of the missiles hit their targets, Bin Laden was not in the camp. Some reports said he left only a few hours earlier.

Clinton was generally well known for being very aware of poll numbers and the political climate that he worked within. However, he was also willing to challenge constraints. On this occasion for decision, although the nation was focused on his impending hearing over Monica Lewinsky, and concern was widespread among his advisors that any retaliatory action would be portrayed as a political move to distract attention from that hearing, Clinton made his decision on national security concerns alone. Furthermore, having the nation focused on his impending hearing limited how many advisors outside of the core national security team were informed of the planned military operation.

In dealing with the crisis, Clinton was very open to information from his advisors. He was also actively involved in gathering more information, deciding not to strike a suggested second target in Sudan because it was not of military value to Al Qaeda and could result in too many innocent victims. In this occasion for decision, President Clinton's motivation can be described as problem focused. Although he was relationship focused and valued "information-gathering networks," Clinton was not wholly dependent on the validation of constituents and his advisors.

Lessons Identified

The individualist tendency to avoid future preparedness if it comes at a high cost was prevalent in this crisis. The embassy bombings did not result in the kinds of lessons learned that might have better prepared the U.S. Government against September 11.

The U.S. Government was already partially aware of the potential threat Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda posed by the time of the bombings in 1998. The Counterterrorism Security Group had been established and was gathering information on his operations. However, despite the availability of information that Al Qaeda was a global network, policymakers at the time knew little about the organization because it had not all been compiled by the intelligence community. They also did not perceive Bin Laden as the serious threat he turned out to be, even after the embassy bombings. This perception affected not only the immediate commitment, but also subsequent allocation of resources towards terrorism intelligence.

The U.S. government did not reevaluate their policies after the event was over. As this was one of the first terrorist attacks on the U.S. of this massive and coordinated a scale, policymakers did not take away many lessons they could have learned in terms of dealing with Al Qaeda and Bin Laden.

Aftermath of Situation

Though the number of U.S. casualties was greater in the Khobar Towers bombing, the embassy bombings were a shock in terms of overall loss of life. However, the failure of the strikes to kill Bin Laden, the accusations of it being a distractionary war, the intense political partisanship of the period, and the subsequently questioned Al Shifa evidence likely had a cumulative negative effect on future decisions about the use of force against Bin Laden. This tragically resulted in continued lack of coordination in the intelligence community, allowing the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000 and the World Trade Centers on September 11, 2001.



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