

## The Importance of Vigilance

Some of you will remember that in 1961, after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev agreed to Cuba's request to place nuclear missiles in Cuba to deter a future U.S. invasion attempt.

Publicly, the USSR denied any presence or buildup of these missiles in Cuba. A disbelieving President Kennedy, in October of 1962, ordered an Air Force U-2 spy plane to fly over Cuba and take photographs to prove them wrong. The presence of medium- and long-range ballistic missiles was confirmed. In response, the United States announced it would not allow offensive weapons to be delivered to Cuba and missiles already in place had to be dismantled and returned to the Soviet Union.

The Soviet government blinked, ending a tense, 13-day standoff. It was U.S. vigilance – in the form of a U-2 that helped thwart the potential impending nuclear threat 90 miles from our shores.

The importance of vigilance is no less important, albeit on a smaller scale, to houses of worship.

Houses of worship are under attack on a weekly basis. They face vandalism, theft, assault, abuse of children, and, in extreme situations, shootings resulting in injury or death.

You must not allow this to happen where you worship, and the following steps can help you reduce the odds of having these things happen.

### **Step 1: Measuring your interactions with those who come to worship**

Safety teams, security teams, sentries, and others dedicated to protecting the congregants should be listening more and talking less. It is easy to get caught up in distracting conversations with those who walk in. Of course, it is natural for congregants to approach you and be friendly, have a conversation and tell you what has been happening with them. To avoid being distracted from your observing activities, you need to measure your conversation and keep it to a minimum. You can be friendly, shake hands, and exchange very brief pleasantries, but the more time you spend focused on them, the less time you are vigilant to surroundings.

### **Step 2: Recognizing and dealing with suspicious people**

Suspicious people can often be identified by their behavior. While no one behavioral activity is proof that someone is planning to act out, there are some factors that can help you assess whether someone may pose a threat. Watch for the following:

- Nervousness, nervous glancing, or other signs of mental discomfort/being ill-at-ease. This may include sweating, staring forward inappropriately, repeating inappropriate prayer or muttering. It could also include repeated entrances and exits from the building with no focus.

- Inappropriate, oversize, loose fitting clothing (for example; a heavy overcoat on a warm day)
- Keeping hands in their pockets or cupping their hands (as in handling a triggering device)
- Constantly favoring one side of their body or one area of the body as if wearing something unusual/uncomfortable (e.g. a holster). Pay attention to someone constantly adjusting their waistbands, ankles or other clothing. Projected angles under clothing may be indicative of a firearm, especially at the waist or ankle.
- Carrying packages. It is recommended that you approach these individuals and ask them about the contents. You need to decide if you are going to allow them in or offer storage at some appropriate area. You can ask to inspect the contents. If they refuse, ask them to take the bag or box back to their vehicle.
- Someone on the outside should be observing people as they exit their car and see how they are adjusting their clothing and how they are approaching the building. Look for signs that they may be carrying a weapon.

The most important step is just to be observant. For example, the Israelis have become aware that some suicide bombers shaved off their beards prior to committing their acts, thus leaving untanned skin and unusual facial tans lines. While I wouldn't expect this particular event at a house of worship, it just goes to show how methodic some actors are when they are carrying out an evil mission.

### **Step 3: Reporting and Communicating**

The first part of vigilance is observation, and the second part involves reporting it. Seeing something without reporting it could bring grave consequences. There should be someone in a leadership position that can take the information and make immediate decisions on how to proceed, whether to call law enforcement or handle it themselves.

It is possible that the individual you are suspicious of could be totally safe. They may have Parkinson's disease; they may have some other disability, and/or they might be wearing a prosthetic device. They could be intoxicated or taking prescription or illicit drugs. It's a chance you must take when encountering others who arouse suspicion.

But remember this important fact: Your vigilance is like an early warning system. It is necessary to anticipate and prepare for acts against your flock or property. When people know that you are watching, it lessens your institution's reputation as a soft target, and a potential wrongdoer may as a result decide to go elsewhere to commit crimes.

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