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Remembering the 1983 terrorist attack on the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait City

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Smoke hangs over the compound of the United States Embassy in Kuwait, Dec. 12, 1983 after a car bomb exploded. The attack was one of six in Kuwait, in which at least two people died, and another fifty were injured. (AP Photo/Chris Edwards)

On December 12, 1983, terrorists drove a dump truck filled with explosives through the gate of the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait City. No Americans were injured, but the blast destroyed the U.S. Consulate building and heavily damaged the chancery. Four days after the attack, the U.S. Department of State ordered its embassies to erect barricades and take further measures to prevent truck bomb explosions.

The suicide bombing in Kuwait City and two other suicide bombings in Beirut, Lebanon, led to a comprehensive review of overseas security and the Department's establishment of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) on November 4, 1985. Secretary of State George Shultz asked Assistant Secretary of Administration Robert Lamb to direct the new DS Bureau. Lamb, an early supporter of DS efforts to accelerate the development of embassy security programs, shared his thoughts with DS Public Affairs (read excerpts from the 2012 interview below).

The first embassy suicide bombing occurred in Beirut in April of 1983. In December of 1983, a truck bomb blew up an embassy building in Kuwait. In September of 1984, a suicide bomber attacked the embassy annex in Beirut. It was clear that these were changing times for us.

We were building embassies with a lot of glass in the 1950s to demonstrate the openness of American society and contrasting it with the Communists. In Africa, for example, we even built an embassy on stilts, and the idea was that demonstrators could riot underneath while embassy employees continued their work upstairs. The concepts were satisfactory for the time, but they turned out to be fairly naïve when we faced real security threats.

One of the things we learned from the bombings in Beirut was that we were going to have to fashion a new approach to embassy security. There was no real alternative to setback and physical restraints to keep suicide bombers and terrorists outside of our embassy grounds. We also had to construct embassies differently because construction materials used in the building caused many of the casualties in these early bombings. In Kuwait, the truck bomber blew up a cinder block wall that broke up and created shrapnel, which endangered our people in the embassy compound.

We did a lot of fresh research into construction technology and developed a setback requirement and new construction standards that made our embassies and diplomats safer than they were before.

On the 36th anniversary of the Kuwait City bombing, the security environment overseas remains as dynamic as ever and well-trained Diplomatic Security Service professionals continue to protect our embassies and diplomats against evolving threats.

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