



Carnage Interrupted: An Analysis of Fifteen Terrorist Plots Against Public Surface Transportation

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Since 1997, terrorists have focused much attention on public surface transportation as a target for attacks. Many

of the plots have failed or been foiled, but those that have succeeded have resulted in large numbers of casualties and caused widespread alarm. This report examines 13 terrorist plots against public surface transportation that were uncovered and foiled by authorities between 1997 and 2010, plus two failed attempts. They were part of an ongoing global campaign of terrorism directed against a variety of targets in Western nations that were branded by jihadists as enemies of Islam. Heading the target list were nations that had deployed troops to Afghanistan and Iraq.

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Study Methods

The authors relied heavily on original legal case documents collected by the Nine Eleven Finding Answers (NEFA) Foundation, official government reports, as well as on available news media accounts. Major sources of information are cited in a suggested reading list at the end of the report. The 15 plots were selected on the basis of what is known about them and the accessibility of information.

Findings

The terrorist campaign was inspired by continuing exhortations from al Qaeda communicators, and it was waged by individuals who subscribed to al Qaeda's ideology. Some of them had trained in its training camps or had learned from information posted on its websites and other jihadist websites. However, all the plots analyzed in the report appear to have been the products of local initiative—individuals or small groups determined to be part of the global armed struggle. From 2001 to 2004, the plotters focused on various forms of chemical attack, possibly inspired by the 1995 nerve gas attack on Tokyo's subways. None of these exotic plots succeeded. Indeed, few passed beyond the talking stage. By mid-decade, successful attacks in Madrid and London demonstrated that by using more-reliable explosive devices on trains and subways, terrorists could achieve the slaughter they desired. Multiple bombs became the new prototype for terrorist attack.

Most of the plots were interrupted before the plotters even decided the date and time of the attack. However, morning rush-hour attacks on crowded trains and buses historically have produced the greatest numbers of casualties.



Intelligence was a key factor in foiling most of the plots. Security for surface-transportation protection did not become a major concern until after the Madrid bombing, and even then, security resources remained limited. However, CCTV cameras appear to have some deterrent value, and they also play an important role in helping to identify attackers who flee the scene of an attack.



Aftermath of the March 11, 2004, Madrid Train Bombing

Policy Recommendations

Much can be learned from terrorists' failures. They offer insights into what terrorists are thinking, how they view and select targets, and what countermeasures appear to be more effective. While intelligence proved to be critical in thwarting these plots, the role of physical security seems to have been, at best, a complicating factor in terrorist planning rather than a preventive factor. The fact remains that public surface transportation systems are necessarily open and therefore unavoidably vulnerable targets. Further analysis is needed to determine what physical measures actually work and how they do.

About the Authors

Brian Michael Jenkins is Director of MTI's National Transportation Security Center of Excellence and an internationally regarded expert on terrorism. Joseph Trella has extensive experience in homeland security and in counterterrorism planning and operations.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2979.html