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Analysis of 15 Failed Terrorist Plots Against Surface Transportation Provides Insight into Tactics, Weapons, and More

Mineta Transportation Institute's free research report amalgamates diverse data

San Jose, Calif., April 10, 2012 – The Mineta Transportation Institute (transweb.sjsu.edu) has released its newest research report, [*Carnage Interrupted: An Analysis of Fifteen Terrorist Plots Against Public Surface Transportation*](#), which examines several factors in 13 plots that authorities uncovered and foiled before attacks could be carried out. It also presents an additional two cases in which terrorists attempted to carry out attacks that failed. Principal investigators were Brian Michael Jenkins and Joseph Trella. The free report is available for PDF download from transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2979.html

“We can learn much from terrorists’ failures,” said Mr. Jenkins, “because they provide insights into terrorist ambitions, clues to possible new directions in tactics and weapons, and details about how the plots evolve. These details often are more difficult to discern when an attack has succeeded and its perpetrators are dead or have fled.”

The reports analyze plots in the West from 1997-2012, primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom because they have been frequent targets. These incidents have involved publicized arrests and trials, which provide additional information.

Among others, the 15 plots include:

- 1997 – Flatbush Plot (New York)
- 2002 – Poison Gas on London Underground Plot
- 2004 – Herald Square Bomb Plot (New York)
- 2005 – Melbourne and Sydney Terrorist Plots
- 2006 – Milan Metro Bomb Plot
- 2006 – Attempted German Train Bombings (Cologne)
- 2008 – Barcelona Metro Bomb Plot
- 2009 – Zazi Bomb Plot (New York)
- 2010 – Washington Metro Bomb Plot (Washington DC)

Mr. Jenkins explains that these plots were part of an ongoing global campaign of terrorism directed against a variety of targets in Western nations. The campaign was inspired by continuing exhortations from al Qaeda and waged by individuals or small groups determined to be part of the global armed struggle.

The report describes each plot in terms of the terrorists’ plan, their motivation, objective, target selection, tactics and weapons, reconnaissance, timing, security measures in place at the target, and how the plot was disrupted.

Mr. Jenkins said, “Terrorists tend to imitate what’s been done before, so they will try to replicate attacks – including targets, tactics, and techniques – that they see as successful. It is not possible to identify the source of inspiration or instruction for all of the 15 cases, but some spectacular precedents are likely to have inspired these plots. For example, four of the plots involved

chemical or biological substances – poison gas or ricin. It seems highly likely that the plotters in these cases had in mind the 1995 sarin attack in Tokyo, where terrorists dispersed nerve gas in subways, killing 12 and sending over 5000 to hospitals. Further inspiration and instruction came from al Qaeda’s own interest in chemical and biological weapons.”

Mr. Jenkins further noted that none of these exotic plots succeeded. Indeed few progressed beyond the talking stage, and it seems doubtful that any would have resulted in mass casualties.

“By mid-decade the poison fad was over,” he said. “Meanwhile, terrorists 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 attacks, a pattern that continued through the end of the decade.”

The complete report is available for free download at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2979.html

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Brian Michael Jenkins is an international authority on terrorism and sophisticated crime. He directs MTI’s research on protecting surface transportation against terrorist attacks. He is also a senior advisor to the president of RAND and was deputy chairman of Kroll Associates. Before that, he was chairman of RAND’s Political Science Department. He holds a BA in fine arts and a Masters Degree in history, both from UCLA. He was a Fulbright Fellow in Mexico and Guatemala, where he also received a fellowship from the Organization of American States. Mr. Jenkins received the Department of the Army’s highest award for his military service. He authored several articles, reports and books, including *International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict* and *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*

Joseph Trella has extensive experience in homeland security at the state level. He has a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in business economics from Loyola College in Maryland and a master’s degree in international negotiations and conflict resolution from the University of Baltimore and School of Advanced International Studies.

ABOUT THE MINETA TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

The Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI) conducts research, education, and information and technology transfer, focusing on multimodal surface transportation policy and management issues, especially as they relate to transit. MTI was established by Congress in 1991 as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and was reauthorized under TEA-21 and again under SAFETEA- LU. The Institute has been funded by Congress through the US Department of Transportation’s (DOT) Research and Innovative Technology Administration, by the California Legislature through the Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and by other public and private grants and donations, including grants from the US Department of Homeland Security. DOT selected MTI as a National Center of Excellence following competitions in 2002

and 2006. The internationally respected members of the MTI Board of Trustees represent all major surface transportation modes. MTI's focus on policy and management resulted from the Board's assessment of the transportation industry's unmet needs. That led directly to choosing the San José State University College of Business as the Institute's home. Visit transweb.sjsu.edu

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