

Dr Dave Sloggett tells Robert de la Poer why transport networks remain such tempting targets for terrorists

WHY TERRORIS



RP: Why do you think transport infrastructure presents such an attractive target for terrorists? There are softer targets that could prove more deadly and more symbolic...

DS: There are several reasons why terrorists think of transport nodes as their preferred target. The first of these is the psychological impact. It stimulates the media to link any new event with past attacks in Madrid, Mumbai, Glasgow and London and has a magnifying impact on the coverage that then results. Other reasons include the difficulties the authorities have in securing major transport hubs. The flow rate of people into and out of such locations can be huge at certain times of the day. Trying to put any form of security in place would massively disrupt that flow and have significant economic repercussions. Stopping people entering places where large sporting events are occurring is a very different proposition. The people want to be there at the start and turn up early knowing they have to pass through a security cordon. In railway stations people expect to enter and be transported quickly and efficiently to their destinations.

RP: The threat from al-Qaeda-linked groups against domestic Western targets appears to have diminished considerably in the past five years. From where do you think the major threats to transport networks are now emanating? What effect should this have on security planning?

DS: I would not be too quick to make judgements on the threat from al-Qaeda-linked groups in the United Kingdom. The list of people attending courts in the last

year has provided ample evidence of the continuing threat from groups with links to Pakistan. Concerns also exist over potential blowback from people travelling to Somalia and Syria who then head home having received instructions in manufacturing improvised explosive devices and have been exposed to firearms training. The fact that many of those brought to justice have failed to achieve their goal has often been down to mistakes they have made. These have brought them to the attention of the authorities.

The group seeking to attack an English Defence League meeting in Dewsbury last year provide a classic example of people operating off the radar horizon of the security services suddenly coming to notice when one of the cars in which they were travelling was spotted by a police patrol not to have valid insurance. When stopped for that offence their other activities eventually came to light.

That said, the attack in Woolwich against Drummer Lee Rigby could so easily have occurred in a train station. The sheer volume of people would allow some people to be potentially fatally injured before the perpetrators were overpowered. In airports armed police would be quickly on the scene. The idea of a lone wolf attack, or as in the case of Woolwich, two people running riot in a highly populated area is not far-fetched. It is a tactic that al-Qaeda has encouraged through writings in its on-line English-language magazine Inspire.

Finding answers to such an attack is extremely difficult. Any thought of profiling passengers is simply a non-starter politically, as is random checks of people's hand luggage. The obvious approach is to try and provide portals that are sensitive enough to sense the

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presence of explosives, but entrances to railway stations are often places where air movements quickly disperse any indicators. The use of dogs is one option but even their capabilities are limited against some of the threats.

RP: Aside from immediate injuries, fatalities and damage, what are the other major impacts of attacks on transport networks? How do you mitigate those effects?

DS: The most important long-term impact is the psychological effect an attack has on a wider target audience. This is where the economic damage can initially be underestimated. Any major capital city that is likely to be in the crosshairs of terrorists would suffer an aftermath in terms of their own nationals being concerned about using the transportation system and particularly the impact it could have on the important tourist industry. Mitigation is all about reassurance and being transparent in providing risk assessments with the public. This allows them to weigh up the threat and make their own judgements as to when and where they travel. Comparators with metrics such as the number of people killed in motorway accidents are always one good way to set the threat from terrorism into perspective.

RP: Given that an explosive device detonated on a high street could cause as many casualties as an attack on the transport network (like the 7/7 bombings), do you think we risk over-investing resources in protecting the transport network? Would it not be realistic to accept that, with the exception of air travel, most public transport

networks cannot be effectively protected?

DS: I do not agree that transport nodes should effectively be unprotected. I acknowledge the difficulties involved but believe efforts have to be made to provide a degree of security at least against the threat from the lone wolf and anyone trying to conduct a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attack against a railway station. Cars and vans operating in the immediate vicinity of transport hubs should be subject to increased levels of security protocols. When it comes to trying to prevent a repeat of what happened on the Tokyo subway system in 1995, however, it is difficult to envisage any measures that might disrupt the attack, other than of course arresting the cell beforehand.

The lone wolf suicide bomber is clearly a very difficult target to detect. Increased community engagement can help but so far that has not proven a reliable method of disrupting attacks. The only practical way to sense their activities is to look for signatures of their behaviour on the Internet, but currently that is something that political leaders are finding it hard to reach a consensus upon. The recent revelations and near hysteria of the activities of some elements of the intelligence agencies on the Internet are also unhelpful

RP: There has not been a successful attack on a Western transport network since the 7/7 bombings, although there have been several attempts. To what do you attribute this?

DS: A part of the reason why attacks have not been successful of late is the terrorists have made mistakes. Their behaviour, in some way, has brought them to the attention of the authorities and their plans have consequently been disrupted. When some of the arrests have occurred the individuals involved have not fully formed their thinking about actual targets. So it is often difficult to judge where they may have attacked had their planning not been interdicted. What is clear is that al-Qaeda's central leadership still regards transport hubs as an important target in the West. The latest threats to emerge, which are based on developments of so-called cavity bombs (concealed within someone's body), are really difficult to disrupt. They are the latest in a chain of innovative developments that characterise the manoeuvre-room enjoyed by the terrorists when it comes to creating new threats.

RP: Nine years after the Madrid train bombings, active security is not noticeably tighter on any of Europe's intercity rail networks or underground transit systems. At the same time, resources such as manned patrols and canine detection units are in increasingly short supply. What can governments be doing to make their overground

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Safe travel: public complacency to the terrorist threat could lead to attacks remaining undetected until it is too late

and underground railways more secure from terrorist attacks?

DS: Given the scale of the threat this is a hugely difficult question to answer. Can we really, for example, deploy any more closed circuit television cameras in major transport hubs? While public vigilance is always a theme, as time moves on from events such as those which occurred in London in July 2005 the public's reaction to such messaging understandably becomes complacent. Reports from Boston showed the degree to which people in the United States had become immunised from the thought that another terrorist attack could occur. One of the people seriously injured by the detonation of the first bomb had seen the terrorist place it and walk away. He chose to believe what he had seen was a perfectly innocent act, not the behaviour of a terrorist.

This offers some insight into the remarks made by Deputy Assistant Stuart Osborne before his retirement from his senior post in the Counter Terrorism hierarchy in the United Kingdom. His observation in March 2013 that "The country is facing the most complex terror threat in its history" was carefully designed to signal the nature of the problems now faced by the security services. In one of his final public statements on the subject he also noted the importance of gaining greater assistance from within communities where right wing extremists, dissident Irish groups or Islamic fundamentalists hide in plain sight. Too many times information has been known about suspicious behaviour of individuals or groups and not passed onto the authorities. If the threat of terrorism against any form of vulnerable target is to be reduced, it has to start with people in communities taking responsibility and alerting the authorities when their suspicions are aroused. To date we have one really good example of that in Bristol, when the Muslim community alerted the police to the activities of Andrew Ibrahim. That co-operation, however, has not been forthcoming in too many other cases.

RP: The UK government has repeatedly warned of nebulous cyber security threats to transport networks, but do you think there is a genuine threat of cyber terrorism (as opposed to vandalism or criminal disruption)? If so, what form could threats take and how should the government prepare for them?

DS: I take the view that the threat from cyber-terrorism has so far been overstated. While threats to signalling systems on railways, air traffic control systems and even maritime port control systems clearly exist they often need the presence of an insider to be really effective. The outcomes of such attacks may equally be uncertain, making those potentially involved shy away and reply upon tried-and-tested approaches rather than being innovative.

RP: Governments and private companies have repeatedly been guilty of protecting transport networks from the previous threat instead of proactively anticipating the next. Is this the correct policy, do you think? If not, what more should they be doing?

DS: The huge problem for the authorities is trying to understand the next evolution of the threat. The terrorists still retain the advantage from a manoeuvre viewpoint. They can choose where to next test the security system, as they did by sending bombs on cargo planes. The so-called "cavity bombs" worn internally by people determined to kill themselves represents a significant change in the way the threat could be presented. While the results have not been conclusive in the few recorded incidences of such devices being used, the designers of the devices will no doubt be trying to perfect their operation. The second generation of the so-called "underpants bomb" has already appeared in Yemen. The threat from explosively formed projectiles is also of extreme concern. One of those detonated in a major transport hub would be a major event.

Dr Dave Sloggett is an author, independent academic and freelance writer on counter terrorism with over 40 years of experience in the defence and security field specialising in the analysis and understanding of the social networks and their behaviour that underscore terrorist group activities. He will be speaking at Transport Security Expo 2013.

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