



RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Anna Averkiou reports on how changing patterns of violence pose new challenges for public transport

The UK has just witnessed the biggest security operation in its history for the State Funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. Upwards of a million people flocked to central London, the Royal Palaces, public viewing screens and funeral routes around the UK.

They were kept safe thanks to decades of detailed planning and surveillance to deal with organised terrorist attacks – such as those plotted or carried out by the likes of al-Qaeda and the IRA in the past. But the authorities also focused on stopping spontaneous acts by individuals – either ‘lone wolves’ with an ideological agenda or individuals motivated by a complex mixture

of other factors. These individuals in many ways are harder to track and be kept from acting lethally, especially when an internationally watched iconic event such as the State Funeral becomes such a huge potential magnet for attention.

This change in focus by the security authorities is paralleled in a new study, *Changing Patterns of Violence Pose New Challenges for Public Transport*, by Brian Michael Jenkins and Bruce R Butterworth, from the Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI).

Its primary finding is that the threat of attacks on public surface transportation and staff in the USA, UK and other economically advanced countries has changed

so significantly over the past 20 years, there is a need to rethink current security strategies.

By analysing data from 5,611 attacks against all public surface transport targets that occurred worldwide between January 1970 and July 2022, they observed a growing problem of violence against passengers and staff on passenger trains and at train stations, buses and bus stations, rail infrastructure and operating and security staff. They not only included explosives and incendiaries, but physical attacks such as stabbings, shootings, arson, unarmed physical assaults and other acts of random violence.

ADVANCED ECONOMIES

Countries with advanced economies (Group 1, economically advanced countries) account for a growing percentage of incidents worldwide, with the USA taking the lead in the total number of incidents and number of fatalities in those countries. While developing countries (Group 2, other countries with the exception of Israel and the West Bank), especially in South Asia, continue to account for most of the attacks with the highest number of fatalities, advanced economies are seeing a surge in low-level attacks carried out by lone attackers.

While the study is limited to public surface transportation, the phenomenon of increasing violence appears to be much broader and notes that unruly, and sometimes violent, passengers are also a growing problem in civil aviation and society in general.

“Large crowds make people, police and security authorities rightfully nervous about what could happen. The threat of not just organised but also spontaneous attacks where there are a lot of people gathered, particularly for high-visibility iconic events, is very real – as evidenced in the UK by how many police and security services personnel were involved in the protection of all the dignitaries, the Royal Family and the crowds who came to pay their respects,” says Butterworth. “We can’t possibly know the many challenges that were successfully faced but clearly the results were good.”

Jenkins added: “Iconic places, such as the World Trade Centre in the United States, the Post Office Tower in London, the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower Hotel and a main railway terminus in Mumbai have drawn organised terrorist attacks, as have large and well-covered gatherings, such as the Olympics. They also can satisfy the desire for attention – a desire to be famous and make an impact – in lone attackers.”

Indeed, at least 10,000 police officers and 1500 soldiers formed a six-mile-wide ring of steel around central London. Many roads and bridges were closed to traffic and 23-miles of barriers helped to control the crowds and keep areas secure. Bollards and portable anti-terror barricades were used around particularly high-risk areas involving VIPs. Police with explosive-detection dogs, police on horseback, specialist firearms officers, divers, motorcycle outriders and close protection officers were also drafted in. Helicopters, drones and CCTV, along with spotters on rooftops, helped monitor crowds from above and a no-fly zone was enforced over the funeral and London procession.

Other plans included managing capacity on London’s public transport network, with Transport for London advising customers to walk. The UK’s intelligence

agency, MI5, and counter-terror police worked together to compile a list of known Jihadists and terror suspects that might pose a threat – also keeping an eye on anyone who might already be known to the police behaving unpredictably in the run up to the funeral. Members of the public were also urged to report any suspicious behaviour, and anyone who seemed “blatantly out of place” among the mourners. In addition, airport-style security checks were at key places such as the queue to see the Queen lying in state and in London’s Green Park where mourners gathered to see and place floral tributes.

THREATS TO PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION HAS CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS

“It seems that good security was matched by good behaviour. Walking members of the Royal Family and government officials over a mile once, let alone twice, just a few feet away from onlookers must have been a huge security challenge,” observed Butterworth.

“One can only marvel at how orderly and respectful the crowds were – especially when you consider how long thousands had been standing in line for many hours or waiting patiently along the funeral route ahead of the main event”.

The authors are quick to warn that large-scale attacks such as Madrid (2004) and Mumbai (2008) should not be dismissed as a potential threat and that bombings continue to constitute more than 55 percent of all attacks on public surface transportation in developing countries – particularly in South Asia. However, in economically advanced countries, security planners now face a more complicated and insidious threat with a rise in incidents of sabotage by anarchists and environmental extremists alongside increasing attacks by individual criminals, persons described as mentally disturbed or, in many cases, unknown attackers.

The violence is increasingly random and carried out by lone individuals who can make potentially lethal bombs, but which very often do not work. Controls on explosives and precursor chemicals have been strengthened – especially in Group 1 countries. Whereas dynamite and commercial blasting caps were once easily obtained in the USA and accounted for most of the bombings in the Seventies, their use required minimal skill. In contrast, buying black powder from a gun store entails risks of attracting attention. Small quantities of explosives can be removed from fireworks, but it is difficult to amass substantial amounts and purchases of fertiliser in large amounts by unknown customers are monitored. This means that would-be bombers must manufacture the explosive components, which is technically more challenging. Travelling to learn how to obtain bomb-making skills has become more perilous. Since most of the attacks in Group 1 countries are one-offs that are planned, prepared and conducted by a single attacker rather than a group,

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there is no learning curve to improve skills and they can only gain these from the internet or other available sources. It is therefore not surprising that the success rate of bombings has declined.

“Despite the decline in success, bombings cannot be excluded as a threat as lone bombers can make powerful and deadly devices – as we saw in the Nashville 2020 and Manchester 2017 bombings. However, our findings do suggest there is less expertise amongst the bombers, which fits the

ADVANCED ECONOMIES ARE SEEING A SURGE IN LOW-LEVEL ATTACKS BY LONE ATTACKERS

general narrative that we’re seeing a shift from organised, relatively well-planned terrorist attacks to more spontaneous efforts,” says Jenkins.

“Many of the attacks are not ordinary criminal activities such as armed robberies; and most have no political nexus,” he explains.

“The increase in violence at transportation venues appears to parallel a general increase in random public violence and reflects broader societal trends occurring on the streets and elsewhere. Many explanations for this trend have been put forward such as the stress of modern society, growing violent crime, courser public behaviour, increases in the number of mentally disturbed individuals and fewer police. Some observers blame the behaviour on the pandemic, but the trends precede COVID-19, and are contributing to a sense of insecurity.”

As the majority of attacks appear to be random, risk reflects exposure. Passengers are more numerous than operating personnel but are exposed

for shorter periods, so their risk is lower. However, well-publicised events play their part in contributing to an overall atmosphere of fear.

There are far fewer operating personnel and they spend longer times on the job, therefore their exposure to risk is greater. Transportation employees are on the frontline in dealing with violent incidents—often on their own or as targets of the violence. They require protection and training.

“A public fearful of travelling adds to economic difficulties for transportation operators and reduced resources for facilities improvements, service and security. The fact that there are fewer riders may contribute even further to a sense of insecurity and it is possible that increased ridership actually contributes to security,” says Jenkins.

TEMPORARY DOWNTURN

“See something, Say something” campaigns are identifying fewer attacks than they were before, though this may be a temporary downturn. The increasingly individual and spontaneous nature of attacks on surface transportation targets make such attacks less predictable and harder to detect. Intelligence operations, while essential, are less likely to obtain warnings. Attacks are only identified when they begin. Rapid intervention is required to prevent or mitigate casualties, but that in turn requires greater security presence, which is costly to maintain.”

Jenkins concludes: “The shift from terrorist to anti-social violence particularly in economically advanced countries is probably far greater than what we include in this report. That will require data which we do not have, which is why we call on the governments and transportation operators to better record what is happening to passengers and staff so that we can rethink our security strategies, preparedness and training” ●

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Bombs constitute more than 55 percent of all attacks on public surface transportation in developing countries

