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For Transit Agencies, Terrorists Are Moving Targets

Riders' Eyes and Ears Among Most Critical Defenses for Rail Systems

By Josh Stephens

According to certain members of the Beverly Hills School Board, a terrorist with impeccable timing could, 10 or 20 years from now, board a subway car headed beneath the city's high school. At the precise moment the train passes under the campus, the terrorist could detonate a device that would blast upward, delivering a catastrophic attack upon the children of Beverly Hills.



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*Los Angeles
County Sheriff's
Department officers
patrol an L.A. Metro
rail
station. News that
documents found in
Osama bin Laden's
compound
suggesting possible
attacks on U.S. rail
lines recently put
transit agencies
on high alert.*

That was one of the nightmarish scenarios cited when Los Angeles began planning its subway system last year. Even though an event of such maniacal dexterity is highly unlikely, the fear of terrorists using the county's rail network as a vehicle of destruction is all too real in the post-9/11 world.

Security experts and transit officials alike all but guarantee that some intentional tragedy will, sooner or later, befall the transit infrastructure of a major American city. In the decade since al Qaeda changed the way Americans fly, the terrorist network has attempted repeats of the 9/11 plot. All have failed.

"Al Qaeda is obsessed with the airlines business, air traffic and disrupting air traffic," said Bruce

Riedel, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "Even before 9/11 and certainly since 9/11, we've done more to secure air passenger safety than any other thing, and al Qaeda still, like a dog that can't let go of a

ADD ALT TEXT

If you see something, text something. In June, [NJ Transit](#) launched a cell phone text tipline for riders to report suspicious activity or packages they encounter throughout the agency's network of 240 bus routes and 15 rail and light rail lines.

Riders are encouraged to provide specific details about the people or packages to the NJ Transit Police Department by sending a text to NJTPD (65873). The tipline, called "Text Against Terror," complements a security hotline (1-888-TIPS-NJT) the agency established in 2003.

In addition, a security page was added to the mobile version of its website, [njtransit.com](#). The page includes emergency contact information and instructions for what riders should do if they see something unusual.

have taken place on transit systems in Mumbai (2002, 2003 and 2006), Madrid (2004), Moscow (2004 and 2010) and London (2005). These attacks and many other bombings in global cities suggest that al Qaeda is no less interested in earthbound targets than it is in aircraft.

According to the Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI) Data Base of Terrorists Attacks against Public Surface Transportation, over 4,000 people were killed in 1,434 attacks between 2004 and 2010. Based on that recent history, if an attack occurred on a transit system in the United States, “we’d be shocked, but we couldn’t claim that we were surprised,” said Brian Jenkins, director of the MTI’s National Transportation Security Center of Excellence.

While a few of those attacks garnered widespread attention—and none took place on U.S. soil—the spectacular nature of the 9/11 attacks contrasts sharply with those that take place in subway stations. But what subway and bus attacks lack in visible terror, they make up for in potential disruptions to the life of a city. An attack on a strategic node, such as a major subway station with multiple lines, could cripple a city and its psyche.

“Terrorists have always tried to target places that would wreak the most havoc, where passenger counts are high and disruption would be at the highest level,” said Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority Police Chief Richard Evans. “Where there can be the most damage from a psychological standpoint, a body count standpoint, and an overall disruption in our ability to function.”

A particularly well-planned attack, of the sort that al Qaeda has favored in the past, could have even broader repercussions.

“If you had two or three people willing to blow themselves up on the New York metro at 9 a.m. on a Monday morning, and just two more people willing to do it on the San Francisco BART system three hours later...the impact would be devastating,” Riedel said.

Free-Flow of People Poses Challenges

Transit infrastructure by its very nature presents a ripe target, terror experts say. While airline passengers have to go so far as to take off their shoes and submit to controversial full-body scans, transit passengers move freely through portals like ghosts. And what passengers can do, so can couriers of bombs, nerve gas and anthrax.

“I think metro systems are extremely vulnerable, easy to attack,” Riedel said. “I’m surprised they haven’t tried it more often in the United States.”

The need for secrecy means that reliable data on the number of attempted attacks on U.S. transit networks is unknown. Thus far, none has succeeded. But seeming quietude is no indication of terrorists’ complacency, experts point out. Riedel said that an al Qaeda attack could befall multiple targets at once, in separate cities, with the intent of creating chaos and sowing fear literally across the country.

Moreover, reports indicate that some of the files captured in Osama bin Laden’s compound refer to potential plots against transit. The scope and likelihood of those plots is unknown to the public, but they served to put transit agencies on alert. Whether or not the late al Qaeda mastermind still has any influence, terrorism experts suggest that attacks are being planned regardless of the leadership of bin Laden or anyone else. In 2009, a relatively advanced plot to attack the New York City subway system was broken up.



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Since stopping and searching passengers airport-style is not an option for transit agencies, the brunt of security efforts go toward intelligence gathering and surveillance.

or contracted out to other law agencies. Police forces that used to focus on street crime have, in the post-9/11 era, taken on a whole new mission. In many ways, that mission presents a greater challenge than does that of securing commercial aircraft.

“If the airlines are the best secured part of mass transit in America, I would submit that metros are the least secure,” Riedel said. The tight security measures in place at airports inadvertently makes urban transit systems more attractive targets.

“As a consequence of the extraordinary numbers for aviation, the number of attempted transit sabotages are climbing,” Jenkins said. “The easy place to rack up a large body count and paralyze a city is on rail systems.”

While transit police might be jealous of their airport colleagues’ ability to stop and scrutinize every passenger, they remain mindful of their purpose: to provide security without disrupting the very purpose of the

networks that they are patrolling. Features like open subway platforms, multiple points of entry, and easy access through turnstiles or other cursory barriers are hallmarks of urban mass transit.

“A lot of the physical security that you might do to these systems could really impede service and can be quite costly,” said Henry Willis, associate director of the RAND Corporation’s Homeland Security and Defense Center.

Enlisting the Public

Transit police must go about the serious work of thwarting al Qaeda with relatively non-invasive measures. Many of those measures revolve around intelligence-gathering and surveillance rather than on any methods that could be considered invasive or confrontational. Anti-terrorism efforts therefore enlist the help of millions of collaborators: the public itself.

“Transit is so big and designed to be easily accessible you have to reach out to patrons, partners and employees,” said Commander Pat Jordan, who leads the branch of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department that serves L.A. Metro. “You can’t have a police officer or deputy sheriff everywhere on the system.”

Widespread “See Something, Say Something” campaigns, including a text-based system started this summer by NJ Transit (see sidebar), are designed to take advantage of the countless pairs of eyes capable of spotting suspicious activity. Defining “suspicious,” however, poses one of the biggest challenges to transit system law enforcement.

“When we initially started, we were shutting down the system every time somebody left a suitcase at a train station,” Evans said. “Well, our trains carry passengers who carry suitcases. So we’ve developed strategies to address that so we can assess the packages with as little disruption as possible.”

Among nationwide best practices, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has also promoted passenger involvement as a key strategy for preventing terrorism. But that’s just one part of a holistic

Many agencies are attempting to become more efficient via novel strategies such as behavior analysis, which seeks to identify “idiosyncrasies that terrorists may show if they’re going to do damage to us,” according to Evans. “You’re more of a people-watcher than you used to be.” Jordan said that one advantage of Los Angeles’ open-entry “honor system” is that police can stop passengers under the premise of checking for payment when, in fact, they may be scrutinizing terrorist who could be casing a station. Should transit operators also worry about attacks on buses or light rail?

“You can make a case that there’s bits and pieces of evidence that [terrorists have] thought about it,” Riedel said. “I don’t think you can make a compelling case for any other part of the transportation system.”

Info Sharing and Collaboration

Aside from their own intelligence gathering, the nation’s otherwise diffuse network of transit agencies rely heavily on intelligence gathered by the TSA. The agency sends out daily briefs and frequently shares best practices.

Both Evans and Jordan praised the TSA’s efforts and said that collaboration among agencies is at a historic high—but collaboration is about all they can do.

“In aviation security, basically the federal government dictates the security regime,” Jenkins said. “The surface transportation systems are far too diverse in terms of size and mode to have a single model. So they use a best practices approach.”

In fiscal year 2010, the TSA’s Transit Security Grant Program gave out \$273 million in competitive grants to the nation’s transit systems for anti-terrorism efforts. The TSA has a stew of acronyms—VIPERS, I-STEP and BASE—referring to security tactics that it encourages agencies to pursue. These programs include training in behavior detection, baseline assessment of security and risk on the nation’s 100 largest systems, and training exercises meant to keep officers alert and ready.

“We see mass transit and passenger rail security programs as a means to use a layered, flexible, and unpredictable approach to securing the public transportation network,” said TSA spokesperson Lisa Farbstein. The next fiscal year, however, is expected to bring less funding for these measures.

The War Against Complacency

Regardless of the money that Washington, D.C., does not provide, transit officials say that vigilance is their most important resource. Waiting for a threat that may never emerge—scanning subway platforms day-in, and day-out—can, however, be a mind-numbing task.

“I think complacency is probably our biggest enemy,” said Evans.

Evans said that his best defense against complacency is to run drills and introduce new techniques and information that keeps security personnel on their toes. He also implicitly invokes the tragedies that have occurred, in London, Madrid, and, of course, New York, to remind his team of their mission.

“Someone might say, gee whiz, nothing’s happened in 10 years, why don’t I just take a smoke?” Evans said. “The idea that something could happen, and if it happens on your watch, you’d have a feeling of responsibility. I think that keeps people aware.”

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