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Mineta Transportation Institute Says Subways Are Still in Terrorists' Sights

Teasant plot follows a predictable pattern to attack transit.

by Brian Michael Jenkins, Director of MTI's National Transportation Safety and Security Center
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The FBI arrested a California National Guard reservist on March 17 as he headed for the Canadian border on his way to Syria. Once in Syria, Nicholas Michael Teasant, who is also a student at San Joaquin Delta Community College in Stockton CA, planned to join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Although he had never attended the army's basic training course and was in the process of being discharged by the National Guard for failing to meet "basic education requirements," Teasant thought he could teach the Syrian jihadists shooting skills and urban warfare tactics.

Determined to deliver what he described as "a maximum blow to the US government," Teasant told a confidential informant working for the FBI that he had previously planned to bomb the Los Angeles subway and had inquired about buying powerful fireworks, presumably to use in an improvised explosive device. Teasant was charged with attempting to provide support to a foreign terrorist organization.

Is this case unusual? Not at all. Buses, trains, and subways – unlike airliners – must provide more access points for the public and are more difficult to secure. They feature more prominently in attacks and plots. And the hardest to detect may be those involving one person – the "lone wolf" attacker – because they may not be collaborating with anyone.

Who is Nicholas Teasant?

It is not clear from the indictment how far Teasant's plan to attack the subway had progressed. He told the informant that the plan had been "all set up," but he and the other plotters then "called it off" because he had heard about some arrests by the FBI and feared that the plot might be compromised.

Teasant, 20 years old, an American citizen, and a convert to Islam, appears to have had problems at home. He worried that his mother, whom he called an infidel, would betray him. But that, he said, would give him "an excuse to put a bullet in her head and five or six bullets in [his] stepfather's head."

Once in Syria, Teasant had ambitions to become a commander and be "on the front of every newspaper in the country." He said, "Like, I want my face on the FBI's top twelve most wanted. Because that means I'm doing something right."

Teasant's mother told reporters that her son might have been motivated to join militants in Syria after learning he would be discharged from the National Guard.

Transit attacks have a long history.

Teasant's selection of LA's subway system parallels other homegrown terrorist plots in the United States and elsewhere. The March 11, 2004 bombing of Madrid's commuter trains by al

Qaeda-linked jihadists, which just over ten years ago killed 191 people, has continued to be a source of inspiration. On July 7, 2005, four al Qaeda-inspired suicide bombers carried out bombings on London's Tube and a city bus, killing 52. Another four jihadists attempted to replicate this attack two weeks later, but their bombs failed to detonate. In 2006, bombs planted aboard a commuter train in Mumbai killed approximately 200.

Other terrorist plots targeting subways or commuter trains were uncovered in London in 2002 and 2003, Sydney in 2005, Milan in 2006, and Barcelona in 2008. Plots in the United States include a 2003 al Qaeda plot to disperse poison gas in New York's subways, a 2004 plot to bomb New York's Herald Square subway stations, a 2006 plot to blow up the subway tunnel under the Hudson River, a 2008 plot to carry out a terrorist attack against the Long Island Railroad, a 2009 plot to carry out suicide bombings on New York's subways, and a 2010 plot to bomb Washington DC's Metro. Of these, the 2009 plot, for which Najibullah Zazi had already prepared the explosives, posed the most immediate threat.

Out of 44 homegrown jihadist terrorist plots in the United States as of March 2014, five were directed against subways or commuter trains, including Teausant's alleged plan. In addition, two more plots prepared abroad targeted subways. In all, there were seven plots to attack surface transportation in the US.

Plotters go for high body counts.

These plots are discussed in [*Carnage Interrupted: An Analysis of Fifteen Terrorist Plots against Public Surface Transportation*](#) (San Jose: Mineta Transportation Institute, 2012, free download). The MTI report notes that in all the cases, the plotters hoped to achieve a high body count. Subways offered easy access and crowds of potential victims. Bombings during rush hours were a preferred course of action.

The plotters obtained information from readily available public sources and conducted their own reconnaissance. (It is not known yet whether Teausant conducted any research or reconnaissance.) In some cases, we know that the plotters observed security measures such as closed-circuit television. A jihadist terrorist manual advises would-be terrorists to avoid train stations with CCTV cameras. In cases where information is available, existing security measures did not prove to be a deterrent to the plot, but of course, we have no information on plots that may have been deterred. Intelligence efforts were the key factor in interrupting most of the plots.

More on average are being killed per attack.

The relative *infrequency but relative lethality* of attacks against subway trains and stations can be quantified by the Mineta Transportation Institute's database of terrorist and serious criminal attacks on public surface transportation throughout the world. The subway system in particular is an attractive target, as are intercity and commuter trains and their stations, along with buses.

The database contains information on 3,754 attacks committed between January 1, 1970 and recorded as of March 10, 2014 against buses, bus stops, and stations; passenger and freight trains and their stations and tracks; passenger ferries (which have suffered some particularly lethal attacks) and their terminals; and road infrastructure. All these attacks killed 9,368 and injured another 33,506, killing an overall average of 2.5 people per attack.

There were 1,810 attacks (48 percent of the total) against buses, bus stations, and stops, killing an average of 3 people per attack. By contrast, there were 788 (21 percent of the total) attacks against intercity commuter and passenger trains and their stations, but they killed on average *more* people – 3.8 instead of 3.0 per attack

But let's turn now to subway trains and their stations in this same time period. Since 1970, there were only 63 such attacks. They represent a small percentage – only 2 percent -- of the total. However, the lethality of attacks is considerably greater at six victims per attack. Yet, to be more accurate overall, when we remove the February 18, 2003 arson incident in Daegu, South Korea, the number of victims falls back in line with attacks against other targets. In this case, a mentally disturbed man ignited a fire that killed and injured a very large number of people – with 198 killed and 147 injured. Without this single incident, attack lethality drops to 2.9, which is less than for passenger trains and stations (which includes the March 11, 2004 attack against the Madrid commuter rail system, which killed 191), and slightly less than for buses.

IEDs increase lethality.

But the comparison changes when we look at attacks since 9/11. Even with the Daegu arson excluded, the 23 attacks that occurred since 9/11 killed 157, an average of 6.8 per attack. In addition, the only attacks that caused fatalities involved the use of improvised explosive devices, such as those used in the 2005 London subway bombings. Those 12 attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) yielded a substantial fatality rate of 13 deaths per attack.

By contrast, the lethality for 1,190 bus attacks since 9/11 was only 3.1 deaths per attack, and the lethality for the 481 attacks against intercity and commuter trains and their stations was only 2.2 deaths per attack.

Comparing both frequency and lethality before and after 9/11 is even more revealing. While the frequency of attacks for bus targets increased from 19.5 per year before 9/11 to 103.5 per year after 9/11, lethality went up only slightly, from 2.9 to 3.1 deaths per attack. For intercity and commuter train targets, the frequency went from 9.7 attacks per year to 41.8 attacks, but lethality (excluding two highly lethal attacks in the rural areas of Angola and one in Cambodia before 9/11) *decreased* from 4.6 to 2.2.

Turning to attacks against subway targets, the frequency of attacks went up only slightly – from 1.2 per year to 2.0. But the lethality of those attacks increased eleven-fold, from an average of 0.6 to 6.8 fatalities per attack.

Finally, we can look at the most lethal combination of targets, explosive devices, and method of delivery in western or similar cities elsewhere. Of the ten most lethal combinations since 1970, five involved subway trains or stations; four involved commuter or intercity train stations; and one involved the December 2013 bus trolley attack in Volgograd, Russia.

Transit attacks are not new.

The most lethal of all the 10 attacks was the August 2, 1981 bombing of the Bologna train station by a neo-fascist terrorist organization, which killed 85 people and injured more than 200. This demonstrates the long history of these attacks. The second and third most lethal combinations were the February 6, 2004 bombing of a Moscow metro train in a station by a Chechen terrorist

group, killing 40 and injuring 122 with a single bomb, and the March 28, 2010 attack by two Chechen suicide bombers who detonated their devices in two underground Moscow metro stations, together killing 40 people and wounding at least 58. The other attacks include the infamous Madrid commuter train and London tube bombings, as well as the December 29, 2013 bombing against a train station in Volgograd.

Clearly, subway trains and stations, as well as passenger train stations, dominate the attacks using explosive devices in major cities

It is easy to understand, therefore, why so many plots target the urban subway and train systems and why the thoughts of this young jihadist recruit turned toward the metro system of Los Angeles.

What to do?

Subway systems by their design have to remain open. Imposing airline-like security measures will make mass transit either slow, unable to carry masses of people, or both. Governments are working hard on detection measures, but these encounter many technological and operational limitations in the real transit environment.

Measures that make it harder for terrorists to predictably achieve success, such as roving patrols, random and selective screening, and improved CCTV monitoring, do help. And, of course, as we saw in the case of this would-be terrorist, competent intelligence and law enforcement intervention remains absolutely vital. We documented these in a 2007 MTI report, [*Selective Screening of Rail Passengers*](#), and in a follow-up report in 2010, [*Supplement to MTI Study on Selective Passenger Screening in the Mass Transit Rail Environment*](#). Both are available for free download.

Meanwhile, keeping both passengers and employees alert is key. “See Something, Say Something” may sound trite and tired in the rapid transit system, but it can work. While the MTI database doesn’t reveal a huge number of cases where it did work, in the 3,754 attacks recorded against train, bus and other targets, there are indications that in somewhat less than 400, someone interrupted the attack. Sometimes the narratives do not specify who took the initial action (in about 170 cases). In other cases, they were interrupted by police, military, intelligence agencies, or anonymous tips. But we also know that in another roughly 45 cases, they were stopped by passengers or citizens in the area, and that in yet another 75 cases, by drivers or crew, transit employees, or security officials on the scene. Without these interventions, the collective death toll could have been much worse.

The experience of the bus system in Israel during the Second Intifada between September 2000 and the end of 2006 gives other examples that trained drivers and employees, and an alert traveling public, can reduce attacks or their lethality. We explored, along with an Israeli security expert, 16 cases of such attacks in a 2012 MTI study [*Security Awareness for Public Bus Transportation: Case Studies of Attacks Against the Israeli Public Bus System*](#). In eight of the 16 attacks, good security measures and security awareness “played a role in stopping the attack or at least mitigating its consequence,” although in some cases, poor tactics and bomb-making skills were also involved.

Yes, our necessarily open transit system and our riders are, unfortunately, targets for people like Teausant. And yes, airline-like security isn't appropriate for open systems such as mass transit. But solutions are being investigated, in part by using data such as this. In the meantime, we are not helpless, nor should we see ourselves that way.