

HSPI Commentary Series

STOPPING TERROR IN AND ON ITS TRACKS

HSPI Commentary 11

March 31, 2010

Kip Hawley, Frank J. Cilluffo, and Sharon L. Cardash



This week's tragic and devastating metro bombings in Moscow and car bombings in the Dagestan region were shocking – but in some ways they shouldn't be. With so many minds and dollars focused on aviation security, surface transportation (including subways, trains and buses) has long been an easier target. Equally, female suicide bombers like the two that authorities identified in Russia this week continue to give us pause since they jar our expectations about perpetrators of such heinous acts. A quick look back at history, however, reveals that there is continuity on this count as well.

As indicated by the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, since 1970 there have been over 4,000 terrorist attacks worldwide on ground transportation systems. Eleven of these occurred in the United States. By comparison, the US experienced 53 attacks on airlines and airports during the same [interval](#). While perhaps not the consistent target of choice, the tactic of targeting the rails is clearly far from novel. Nor is it dated. Just think of Najibullah Zazi, who pleaded guilty to terrorism charges last month. He, along with co-conspirators, planned a coordinated bombing campaign against passengers traveling on the New York City subway in three spots

during [rush hour](#). Residents of London and Madrid certainly need no reminder of similar attacks executed on 7/7 and 3/11 respectively.

While not the mainstay of terrorist ranks, women have in past taken on the most gruesome of roles (among others), namely that of suicide/homicide bomber. Between 1985 and 2006, there were more than 220 such [cases](#). In Sri Lanka, female suicide bombers were part of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)'s fight; and in 1991, one of their number assassinated then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Al-Qaeda too has encouraged such [activity](#); and there have been a number of cases of women suicide/homicide bombers in Iraq – including last month, when almost forty Shiite pilgrims were killed in such an [incident](#). The Chechen “Black Widows” have for years also left their fatal [mark](#). Worse yet, to the extent that female operatives of this sort pose a danger, it is of course a generalized threat – with risk not limited to the train-going public alone.

From a US perspective, what can be done to improve transportation security (outside the aviation realm) especially against a crafty and determined adversary that will continue to try to circumvent any countermeasures introduced? Injecting uncertainty into the system, for example through random and targeted interviews and inspection of baggage, is a step in the right direction. Efforts such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA)'s Visible Intermodal Protection and Response (“Viper”) [teams](#) and the New York City Police Department's “[Operation Hercules](#)” also aim to knock off balance those who wish to do us harm. Moving forward, efforts along these lines must be redoubled as we continue in other domains to build on and achieve greater equilibrium with aviation security measures.



Significantly, programs like Viper and Hercules rely in part on behavioral indicators, which are all the more important in contexts where tools such as advanced imaging technologies may not be routinely used. Defensive measures undertaken by public authorities can only take us so far, however. As a result, community engagement and citizen awareness remain important elements of the equation. Vigilance is a team sport. Solid intelligence underpins safety and security, and helps make sure that our last line of defense does not become our first.

Whether the 2010 Moscow metro and Dagestan car bombings generate transnational (as opposed to regional) terrorist momentum in Russia's direction is for now an open question. Regardless of the answer, we should all take heed. The threat, vector, and tactic are all more timeless than they might initially seem. While terrorists are indeed innovators who devise new means and modalities of attack, more often than not they are imitators, who refine their

tactics and modus operandi based on lessons learned, so as to maximize lethality and likelihood of success.

Indeed, terror planners purposely design attacks to exploit societal norms. This means the next Abdulmutallab could be a pregnant woman, an elderly or disabled person, and one of the many trained, “clean skin” operatives (with no criminal background or known affiliation with any terrorist or extremist organization) at our adversaries’ disposal. We would do well to adopt a correspondingly nimble and robust posture. To that end, filling the top spot at TSA is a critical next step — for now is an inauspicious time for an authority and accountability gap between the Administration’s leadership at the Department of Homeland Security and career professionals at TSA.



In the interim, we should strive to support all of those on the frontlines, from intelligence officials to law enforcement authorities to military personnel, who are working on our behalf around the world, around the clock. The next attack is due and it won’t be a new TSA director who stops it. Rather, it will be professionals at the tip of the spear, acting with the engaged involvement of the traveling public – whether by air, train, subway, or bus.

For more of HSPI’s work on mass transit security, visit the [Hot Topic page](#).

***Kip Hawley** is Former Administrator of the Transportation Security Administration. **Frank J. Cilluffo** is Director of The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI). **Sharon L. Cardash** is Associate Director of HSPI.*

HSPI Commentaries are intended to promote better policy by fostering constructive debate among leading policymakers, academics, and observers. Designed to be timely and relevant, HSPI Commentaries seek to illuminate the issues of the day by raising important questions and challenging underpinning assumptions. Opinions expressed in Commentaries are those of the author(s) alone. Comments should be directed to hspi@gwu.edu.

Founded in 2003, The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) is a nonpartisan think and do tank whose mission is to build bridges between theory and practice to advance homeland security through an interdisciplinary approach. By convening domestic and international policymakers and practitioners at all levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors, and academia, HSPI creates innovative strategies and solutions to current and future threats to the nation.