



TERRORISM: WHAT ARE THE REAL RISKS?

The message from politicians has been simple. For Ken Livingstone it would be “miraculous” if “some terrorists didn’t get through” while for the Prime Minister and the Head of the Metropolitan police it’s a question of “when not if”. Their plea for us to be “alert but not alarmed” is difficult to internalise when the scenarios range from a lone suicide bomber, through a Madrid style attack, to an unconventional chemical, biological or nuclear attack. “Prepare for every eventuality” is a cliché that has ratcheted the nation into a febrile state. But won’t help you survive an attack. In amidst this maelstrom of fear, there is what Donald Rumsfeld might call “known knowns”. They are these: the UK has been on the second highest state of alert since January. Police have arrested 520 terrorists since September 11, of whom half have been charged and ninety are due in court soon. At least two suicide bombers are known to have been recruited in the UK by Bin Laden’s former military commander Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks who is now in US custody. Worldwide the security services claim great success for foiling around two hundred Al-Qaeda plots and preventing ninety-five per cent of attacks. London has allocated seven million in the coming year to pay for two hundred more fire fighters, and has doubled the number of emergency response fire units, from five to 10. For all this, as a member of the IRA said during the height of their mainland bombing campaign: “we only have to be lucky once, you have to be lucky every time”. I tracked down Britain’s leading risk consultants to find out what the real risks are, and what are science fiction.

AIRPORT SECURITY:

Off-the-record, security experts are quick to acknowledge that airport security remains one of our most vulnerable areas, despite the measures introduced over the past year-and-a-half. The most obvious danger – of a straightforward repeat of September 11th – has not gone away. The RAF would, in the event of a hijacking, scramble Quick Response Aircraft. These pilots have been psychological trained to enable them to shoot down a civilian aircraft if they receive the order. The first step for a pilot who suspects a plane has been hijacked is to try to make radio contact. If there is no response, he must ‘buzz’ the plane: fly incredibly close to grab its attention. If this fails, he must fire a warning burst of gunfire. If there is still no response, the Prime Minister will be contacted and decide whether to shoot the plane down. In the US, President Bush has delegated this responsibility to two generals if he is out of contact. Tony Blair has refused to do this.

But this is not the experts’ biggest concern. There are over one hundred and fifty thousand shoulder-launched rocket launchers in global circulation. Many are now available on the global black market. (Ironically, over one thousand of these were supplied by the CIA when the US armed the Mujaheddin against the Russians in the 1980s). These could be launched from within a very wide radius: almost anywhere on a plane’s early flight path. Al Qaeda has already done it: they shot a missile against an Israeli jet in East Africa last year that narrowly missed. It

was anxiety about a repetition of this in London that prompted the government to cancel several flights from Heathrow last year and to station tanks on the airport's perimeter fence.

What about a straightforward repeat of 3/11? Ten bombs on the tube network at rush hour. Risk consultants concede this is the toughest scenario for emergency services to deal with. Disaster in the pitch-black; mangled carriages 100 feet below the city streets. Experts admit nervously that an open transport system is incredibly hard to defend. "All passengers are anonymous, and a terrorist can easily swim amongst the 800,000 people who are using the system at 6pm each weekday," says one.

A spokeswoman for London Transport explains the good news: "The IRA bombing campaigns of the eighties mean that the tube is prepared for terrorism. Bins have been removed. Seats, bolted to walls, are made of perforated metal to ensure nothing goes unnoticed, vending machines are sloped so that packages can't be left on top. It's the biggest area of controlled public space in Europe, with stations constantly manned and monitored."

Yet these were preparations for conventional bomb attacks – killers who deposit their bombs and fled. What about suicide bombs? This isn't a wild fantasy: two British citizens staged a suicide attack in Israel last summer that killed 3 people and injured over 50. Last year British Transport police introduced undercover anti-terrorism patrols – previously used for tackling pick pocketing – to look out for anyone sizing up the network for an attack.

And what about the overland network? 11,000 miles of railway and more than 2,500 stations, many of them unmanned. Dr Sally Lievesley is a Risk Consultant who was in charge of practising a bomb attack on Madrid just one month ago. She says in the deadpan tones of a professional manager of risk, "If we had 1500 casualties lying by the tracks in Britain, it would be difficult to predict how well we would respond." She suggests Britain needs to do far more now to prepare. "We need sniffer dogs and telephone reporting points for passengers to immediately pass on information about suspicious sightings."

CROWDS:

A repeat of the Bali bombs – another Al-Qaeda signature – is a significant risk. Sir John Stephens, the Head of the Metropolitan Police, has warned that Al-Qaeda have a track record which suggests they will try to maximise civilian casualties by striking pubs, shopping centres or clubs: the Birmingham bombings of the 1970s writ large. 202 people were killed in Bali just 18 months ago. Risk consultants are clear: these kinds of attacks are virtually impossible to stop, short of introducing Israeli-style infra-red searches at the entrance to all public places. One explains that places like Brent Cross and the Arndale Centre are especially vulnerable. "There is not a lot you can do to clear a shopping centre," he warns.

Nor will attacks necessarily be targeted on the South East, which has seen the biggest increase in security. Nigel Churton, Chief Executive of Control Risks, explains, "London is where the

picture-post card targets are. But if you look at recent Al-Qaeida attacks they have been of ordinary people going about their business. The reality seems to be that rather than prestige, they are after mass casualties. The twin towers might have been a symbol of US power, but they are also office blocks with an awful lot of people in them." So residents of Manchester and Birmingham are as vulnerable as Londoners.

The experts are also clear that when an attack comes, the scale of the carnage will be determined – in part – by us. The Government has begun a public information campaign about vigilance on the tube. Yet they have failed to provide guidance for the really dangerous – and casualty-heavy – scenario: how we should act during an attack. Warnings about watching for suspicious bags will not help us when – as we are constantly being told – a bomb "inevitably" goes off. Civilians trained in first aid techniques are far more important at Ground Zero of an attack than the emergency services. In the "golden hour" after an attack, most deaths occur because of blood loss. Simple binding of wounds can save scores of lives while paramedics are still switching on their sirens. One risk consultant explains, "When first aid courses are mentioned in a Monday morning meeting, most people hide under the desk and look in the direction of the photocopying boy." But mass first-aid training will save far more lives than the current poster campaign.

Evacuation procedures are also essential – yet they are not happening in Britain. Sally Leivesley, from her experience of bombings throughout the world, argues that those with a well-practised drill - civilians who are psychologically prepared for an emergency – are least likely to panic and inadvertently maximise civilian deaths. Most companies in Britain have never practised a bomb drill. Even in London, she argues, the Mayor has not been anywhere near active enough in promoting these procedures. Yet one of the reasons for this reluctance on the part of businesses has been anxiety about how keen a well-informed workforce will be to part with their duvets in the morning. In the words of one Chief Executive, "If I had an open discussion about risk then I wouldn't have any staff."

HIGH PROFILE POLITICAL TARGETS:

Al-Quadea has a track record of political assassinations, from the murder of Afghan democrat Commander Mossoud the day before September 11 to the repeated attempts on President Musharraf's life in Pakistan. "An attack on a senior politician is probably their number one target" said a leading risk assessor. The Prime Minister's security has been greatly tightened. A bullet proof screen has been fitted in the stranger's gallery to prevent an attempt on his life during Prime Minister's Questions. Concrete barriers have been installed to prevent suicide bombers approaching Parliament by road. Armed police are now stationed in boats on the Thames.

DOOMSDAY SCENARIOS



The fear that famously keeps the Prime Minister awake at night is that Islamic fundamentalists will form an unholy alliance with rogue states to get hold of rudimentary chemical, biological or nuclear weapon. Abdul Quadeer Khan, Pakistan's leading atomic scientist and the father of the country's nuclear bomb, was indeed running a "mail order business" for WMD until last year. Even a small-scale chemical or biological attack claiming fewer victims than a conventional attack could trigger massive public panic.

The truth, in this area at least, is reassuring. Most analysts believe that Al Qaeda would love the cachet of being the first terrorist group to use these weapons, but, as Nigel Charton explains, "There was a degree of evidence from Afghanistan that Al-Qaeda would produce dirty bombs, but their record shows that they used proven technology in Madrid and in New York. Why would they make difficulties for themselves? [Chemical or biological weapons] are difficult stuff to play with and difficult to spread".

A full-scale al-Qaeda nuclear weapon is impossibility because of the complexity of the technology, the vast cost and the huge infrastructure required. Yet a 'dirty bomb' is easier to make and without public education in advance of an attack might be interpreted as a nuclear attack and cause hysteria. In fact, a dirty bomb is where conventional explosives like semtex or TNT are salted with radioactive material. This material is not rare: it could be extracted from standard machines used in hospitals, factories and farming. Its destructive potential would not be great. Frank Barnaby, author of 'How to Build a Nuclear Bomb', explains, "Generally an immediate deaths would be caused by the detonation of the convention explosive. Radioactive material would enter the atmosphere after an explosion and be diluted to low concentrations. A low-level exposure to radiation would slightly increase the long-term risk of cancer."

A chemical attack on an underground has already happened. In Tokyo nine years ago the AUM Shri no cult released an aerosol containing the nerve agent sarin on the Tokyo subway. Twelve people died, and more than five and a half thousand were injured. The ingredients are legal. The chemical preparations are available in scientific journals. They wouldn't be beyond the expertise of an average post-graduate chemist, according to Barnaby, a distinguished scientific expert. Risk assessors agree that this not an unlikely method of attack, but that actual fatalities would probably be lower than in conventional attacks.

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