



Red Cell Report

Applying alternative analysis to homeland security

Post-London Outside Expert View: Thinking Beyond Mass Transit For Next Homeland Attack

July 21, 2005

Summary

A Homeland strike soon after the London attacks is conceivable but unlikely, and if and when it comes, it could just as well be on other “soft targets” as on mass transit. These were the conclusions of 18 leading academic terrorism experts, former senior National Security Council and DHS officials, mass transit security specialists, and other nongovernmental experts and creative thinkers polled by the DHS Analytic Red Cell immediately after the July 7 attacks.

- *Many Red Cell participants said terrorists would probably remain focused for now on striking other Western nations rather than the Homeland.*



- *If terrorists attacked, participants believed small-scale attacks against mass transit were possible but other “soft targets”—like malls, hotels, schools, and public gathering places—were just as attractive. Few mentioned terrorists attacking or exploiting air transit or planning “the big one.”*

- *Other concerns centered on the possible threats from indigenous jihadists and from Man-Portable Air Defense Systems.*

The Red Cell participants’ remarks highlighted the challenge in defending such a wide range of soft targets, suggesting the heightened importance not only of existing protective measures, but also overseas counterterrorism efforts, tight border controls and robust emergency preparedness and response capabilities.

- *For some, London brought renewed attention to the possibility of closed circuit television as a potential preventive and investigative tool.*

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Project Concept

The Red Cell sought an outside, independent perspective on the possible ramifications – if any – to the Homeland following the London terrorist attacks of July 7, 2005. This paper, which draws on the conclusions of 18 non-governmental experts, speculates on possible targets and timing, and suggests other alternative implications.

Program Overview

The *DHS Analytic Red Cell* program provides independent and alternative assessments intended to provoke thought and stimulate discussion. Papers represent an assimilation of opinions, sources, and methodologies, and are not necessarily derived from specific threat reporting. Papers are not meant to represent a DHS or U.S. Government corporate view.



Concern Over Future Homeland Attack, But Attack No More Likely Than Before

The participants showed concern over prospects for a future jihadist attack against the Homeland, but did not maintain that such an attack was any more likely as a result of the London bombings.

- According to some, the attack was an “ominous” reminder of the continued operational capabilities of Islamic jihadists. Terrorists’ long-term goals for attacking the Homeland remain steadfast, and their planning for attacks against the Homeland may even be under way. One Red Cell participant said the London attacks “countered the perception that terrorists are running scared.”
- Some expressed concern about the increased risk of copy-cat attacks against the Homeland by individual jihadists or sympathetic groups. The London attacks likely would inspire and empower others to continue planning.

Red Cell participants largely believed that, while al-Qaida (AQ) leaders were likely engaged in **long-term planning for an attack on the United States, most jihadists** were focused on striking targets in Western Europe—with it being “London’s turn” last week.

- Some speculated that AQ leadership remains interested in large-scale “grandiose” attacks in the United States, but has delegated operational authority to local cells willing to engage in less spectacular attacks that put pressure on U.S. allies in the war in Iraq.
- Others pointed out how the attacks coincided with a unique event—the G-8 summit—and were likely meant to send a signal to the United Kingdom regarding cooperation with the United States. (See Red Cell Report, “*The G-8 Summit: An Opportune Time for a Terrorist Attack?*” of May 14, 2004)

Mass Transit Systems Are a Target . . .

Participants showed heightened concern that the London attack, like the Madrid attack before it, signals that mass transit in the Homeland is a potential target. Additionally, they viewed attacks during rush hour as most likely to cause panic and economic disruption.

- Trains, buses, subways and their supporting infrastructure, such as platforms and stations, were identified as the most likely targets. Major metropolitan areas were of particular concern.
- Participants also frequently cited bridges and tunnels as attractive transit targets.

. . . But Other Soft Targets Remain Attractive

Participants, however, were nearly unanimous in their belief that London showed that AQ related elements might seek to attack a broader range of homeland soft targets than just mass transit. They also consistently suggested terrorists might prefer major urban areas for soft target selection, though some opined that attacks on the heartland also would be devastating.





- Shopping malls, hotels, convention centers, and other economic targets with retail themes were frequently identified because of their high population densities and lesser security measures. Schools and even police stations also were noted for their shock value.
- Participants also said that terrorists would consider many other targets that generate large gatherings, such as national monuments or theme parks.
- Most respondents shied away from the air transportation infrastructure because, as one said, there were simply “too many checks” at airports for a prospective attacker to overcome.
- One participant expressed concern about cyber-related attacks.

Future Attacks Will Likely Be Smaller-Scale Than 9/11

Participants generally asserted that **London, like Madrid, showed that smaller-scale attacks on the Homeland could be effective**—and more likely, given the dispersal of AQ into a more loosely affiliated network. They particularly believed that the risk of multiple simultaneous conventional explosives had now increased. Because of the relative ease of such attacks, one commenter called this trend “very ominous.”

- One respondent believed that a 9/11-type attack would be counterproductive as it might spur massive U.S. retaliation.
- Another mentioned car and mail bombs in the Homeland as potential variants on a London-style attack.
- Conversely, one believed that AQ’s leadership remained fixated on “topping 9/11” in the United States. Others emphasized AQ’s interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction and then using them against the Homeland, if at all possible.

Additional Participant Insights

Beyond the potential targeting of mass transit and other soft targets, some Red Cell participants pointed out that:

- London was the latest data point in the trend toward **the emergence of true sleeper cells**, “grassroots” terrorism perpetrated by fully-documented and socially integrated operatives.
- The United Kingdom’s **closed circuit television (CCTV) networks proved invaluable** in identifying the perpetrators of the London attacks. While such technology may not deter suicide bombers, it could potentially deter such forms of attack as the remote-control rail bombings seen in Madrid.
- The use of **surface-to-air-missiles** within the United States remains a low-probability but high-impact threat, one noted.



Implications for Homeland Security Countermeasures

The remarks of Red Cell participants suggest that post-London **protective efforts continue to include, but go beyond, just mass transit.** Because of the challenge of securing such a range of soft targets while maintaining the American way of life, they also underscore the need for **other kinds of measures.** Their findings suggest:

- The need for effective counterterrorism measures overseas and at borders to break up foreign terrorist networks and prevent terrorist entry, such as cooperation with foreign security services, border controls, authentication of entry documents, and surveillance of suspect individuals.
- The importance of emergency preparedness and response (EPR) to limit casualties, property loss, and damage to public confidence in the event of an attack. Some participants believed that adequately defending soft targets was so difficult that EPR capabilities needed to be given even greater priority in overall homeland security planning.

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Red Cell Participants:

Academic and other counterterrorism experts

Former senior National Security Council officials

Former senior homeland security official

Think tank security policy analyst

Academic rail security expert

Mass transit system security official

Former Nuclear Regulatory Commission official

Novelists and screenwriters