



Trends & Tactics: Case Study on Cell Phone Video Surveillance

January 5, 2011

Overview

On December 15, 2009, the City of London Police released film footage of hostile reconnaissance conducted in July 2008 by an Algerian national (Subject 1). Subject 1 was stopped by two alert police officers who saw him using his cell phone camera to record video inside Liverpool Street Station in London. When the police officers examined the footage they found 90 minutes of video recording of various sites in and around London and several UK cities to include Tube and mainline rail stations, shopping areas, bars, and restaurants. His detention and the follow-up investigation led to the arrest of Subject 1's brother (Subject 2) and a third Algerian male (Subject 3). British authorities also looked at 30 other individuals and recovered extremist material supporting al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb in one residence. Police believe the two brothers may have been fundraising and conducting surveillance for a future terrorist operation.

This report examines Subject 1's video surveillance tradecraft. Security professionals are encouraged to share this information with members of their security team; effective surveillance detection and deterrence requires the participation of all available resources.

Initial Arrest & Investigation

"The videos themselves are very clear and are obvious examples of hostile surveillance videos from the way they were taken."

Counterterrorism Division – Crown Prosecution Service London

On July 11, Subject 1 entered Liverpool Street Station, a major London transit and retail hub. Liverpool Street Station is the third busiest station in London after Waterloo and Victoria stations. During peak hours, approximately 26,000 people per hour move through the main concourse area and an additional 100 trains an hour travel through the underground station transporting another 30,000 people. At 11:15 a.m., police officers noticed Subject 1 walking along the upper concourse filming and capturing all areas of the station. His behavior was deemed suspicious by the officers because he appeared to be covering the red light on his cell phone with his finger indicating the phone was on video mode. The police stopped Subject 1 and asked to see the footage on his cell phone. An examination of the phone revealed 90 minutes of film footage, including a series of 25 minute videos of various train/railroad stations, security cameras, entrances/exits, bars, restaurants, and shopping centers. Subject 1 indicated he was a tourist and did not speak English. The police deemed both the video recording and Subject 1's interaction with them as suspicious. He was arrested under immigration offenses and transported to Bishops Gate police station. After further reviewing the film footage, authorities arrested Subject 1 under authority of the Terrorism Act of 2000.



(U) CCTV footage catches police officers walking toward the subject.

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Further investigation discovered that Subject 1 arrived in Britain approximately ten years prior; his brother, Subject 2, arrived in the UK in 1997. Once in the UK, both men obtained national insurance numbers and took blue collar jobs in the service sector. They maintained a low-profile living very simply in a one room apartment in the London borough of Brent with the third Algerian, Subject 3. Having established themselves, they became involved in large-scale credit card and identity theft fraud, obtaining multiple credit cards on bogus applications which they used to buy luxury goods to export to Algeria. The subjects also bought £5000 worth of cell phones with fraudulent credit cards. British authorities also looked at 30 other individuals.

According to a Detective Chief Inspector involved in the case, "Extremist material suggesting a link to al-Qa'ida in North Africa was found during the search of one property...but he added that no connection was found between the Algerians and any known terrorist group in the United Kingdom." Besides being involved in large scale fraud, police believe that before going back to Algeria, the brothers carried out surveillance for a future terrorist attack.

Video Surveillance Tradecraft

"There are cameras, there are cameras everywhere."

Voice of Subject 1 while filming Liverpool Station, July 7, 2008

The investigation further revealed that Subject 1 conducted extensive video surveillance from July 7 to 11. Although July 7 was the anniversary of the July 7, 2005 terror attacks in London, there is no indication that this was anything more than a coincidence. The video footage included the concourse at Liverpool Street railroad Station, the nearby Broadgate Circle shopping and restaurant plaza, Mornington Crescent (one of the deepest stations on the Tube network), and the Northern Line platforms at Camden town station.



(U) Entrance to Mornington Crescent Underground.

He also took a tour bus ride through central London getting off at Oxford Circuit Underground Station. He filmed the foyer area of the station in which approximately 230,000 people travel through every day. Film footage also showed the brothers visiting the Galleria shopping centers in Hatfield and Bluewater, the Ashford shopping centers in Kent, and a trade outlet in Bridgend, South Wales. It is not known if their visit to the shopping centers was to conduct pre-operational surveillance, to make fraudulent credit card purchases, or both

Although Subject 1 did a significant amount of travel on the London tube and bus network during the cited period, police were unable to track him via his "oyster card" (electronic ticketing used on public transportation services in the greater London area of the UK). It is believed that the oyster cards were being swapped among multiple users to frustrate any subsequent CCTV research carried out by police.

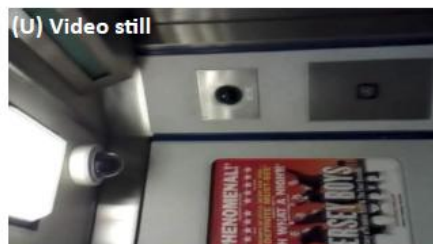
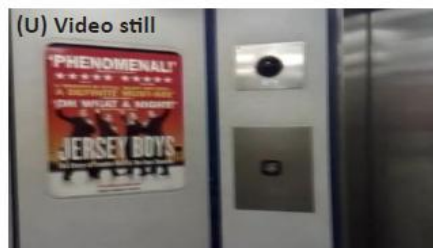
Other indicators of Subject 1's surveillance tradecraft include conspicuously covering the red light on his mobile phone when video recording in the presence of others. When visiting various Tube and mainline stations, he concentrated on filming maps, trains, entrances/exits, and CCTV cameras. Throughout the film footage, Subject 1 periodically focused the camera on himself. In these segments, he appears secretive and nervous which is not synonymous with tourist photography. The reason he did this was to (a) prove to others that it was him conducting the surveillance, (b) avoid unwanted attention from the public, and (c) capture footage from various angles such as location of CCTV cameras on the ceiling of the stations. Of particular interest is when he turns the camera on its side to almost 90 degrees for no reason. This could signify the beginning and/or end of surveillance or highlight a specific target or targets. Interestingly, this was also done by an al-Qa'ida operative conducting video surveillance of the World Trade Center in New York City prior to the 9/11 attacks.

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Subject 1 is also periodically overheard making comments while video recording security countermeasures at some of the sites he visited. Around midnight on July 10, the day before his arrest, Subject 1 visited Mornington Crescent, which is a “deep hole” Tube station only accessible by elevator. Inside the elevator, he is heard making comments about the location of CCTV cameras. After taking video footage of the CCTV cameras in the elevator, he turns the camera 90 degrees on its side.

Result of Investigation

At the time of their arrest in July 2008, the two brothers were initially held under the Terrorism Act of 2000. In March 2009, Subject 1’s case was reviewed, by which time he had been prosecuted and convicted for identity card offenses, instead of terrorism offenses (the fraud charges roughly carried the same sentence as the terror offenses). He received a sentence of two years. Subject 2 was also convicted and sentenced to two and one half years imprisonment for conspiracy to defraud and identity card offenses. Both men were deported to Algeria after serving short prison sentences. The third suspect was initially charged with fraud offenses, but the case against him was dropped; he is believed to have returned to Algeria.



(U) Footage of the security cameras inside an elevator (Mornington), then turning his camera 90 degrees on its side.

Lessons Learned

“If they had not been disrupted the consequences would have been dire. You have to ask yourself why would someone be going into a ‘deep hole’ Tube station and filming the CCTV cameras.”

Detective Superintendant Chris Greany. City of London Police

The surveillance video recovered from Subject 1’s mobile phone camera provides insight into terrorist surveillance tradecraft and techniques and has application worldwide. The following operational security measures may help detect and deter hostile surveillance activity (both criminal and terrorist) directed against U.S. private sector facilities and personnel overseas.

Based on what is known of al-Qa’ida training, heavy emphasis is placed on using cameras (still and video) for both overt and covert surveillance. In 2001, al-Qa’ida operative L’Hoyssaine Kherchtou testified in New York City that he took a two-week surveillance seminar in a training camp in Pakistan in 1992. When asked if he trained in any particular equipment to use during surveillance, he replied, “Yes. We were trained how to use different cameras, especially small ones, develop the pictures, and to take the pictures holding the camera so that the surveillant is not looking through it.” Today, the ubiquity of small hand-held cameras and cell phones equipped with cameras add another dimension to this threat. They are easy to use and can be easily shared with other members of the surveillance team.

Timely and accurate reporting of suspicious actions by organization personnel is essential to spot, deter, or disrupt a terrorist operation. The U.S. private sector should encourage their staff to report any suspicious event, no matter how innocuous it may seem. It is important to report what type of suspicious behavior was noticed and where it was detected. Understanding and appreciating where the activity took place will assist in understanding what might be of interest – that is, the potential target. It should be emphasized that terrorist surveillance indicates a group’s interest in a specific target or the search for options. It does not automatically signal a group’s intent to attack. The surveillance activity could be a

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diversionary tactic or designed to have the target deploy costly security resources. Confirmed surveillance incidents should be assumed to be part of an attack cycle until proven otherwise.

It is only during the surveillance phase and the final preparations for an attack that the surveillant will telegraph his/her interest in a target. It is at this point that they are most vulnerable to detection and disruption of the attack cycle.

For Further Information

OSAC continues to monitor trends and emerging issues related to tactical surveillance, threats, and risk management. For additional information on general pre-operational surveillance techniques, please log in to the OSAC website to view the report titled: [Managing the Threat: An Introduction to Surveillance Detection](#). If you would like to contact OSAC to discuss these issues in greater detail, please contact one of our analysts from the Global Security Unit.

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