

School Bus Terrorism: A Practical Analysis with Implications for America's Schools

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In this paper I will discuss one specific aspect of terrorism: attacks including school buses as targets or weapons. I will assume a basic knowledge of terrorism and terrorist groups. Thus I will not discuss in detail the motivations or specific tactical movements of terrorists. I will be dealing in strategies and methods that apply to anti-terrorism in a particular area.

The premise of this paper is the very real threat of another terrorist attack on American soil carried out by a foreign terrorist group (or one with foreign roots). This is not to deny or ignore the existence of domestic terrorist organizations or the horror of their actions – this study will in fact have implications for their attacks as well. Not only are foreign Islamist terrorists groups our current “main enemy”, they have also shown that they know no boundaries in their attacks. In an Institute for Counter-Terrorism paper, Monty Sagi writes:

“The Beslan atrocity showed that there are no “red lines” for Islamic terror; it is limited only by what it is capable of accomplishing, not by normal civilized constraints or human emotions. If the means are available, no magnitude of destruction and death is “too much” to joyfully carry out.” [1]

And as Dr. Robert Friedmann, Director of the Georgia-Israel Law Enforcement Exchange program (GILEE) has stated, “To terrorists, schools are a very attractive target.”

My decision to focus on school buses is for two reasons: transportation is a preferred target of terrorists worldwide, and an attack on a school-related target would strike into the heart of America with unprecedented force. Recent congressional testimony has stated that 42% of international terrorist incidents have focused on transportation systems as targets [2] , and the FBI has stated that 40% of international mass transit attacks from 1920 to 2000 used buses as targets. [3] More specifically, a compilation of

terrorist incidents with schools as targets shows that about 37% of school terrorist attacks have focused on buses as targets. [4] While neither of these numbers makes up a solid majority of incidents, this is a large enough percentage for a single type of target to warrant serious concern.

Buses are preferred targets for a few reasons. There is a high concentration of people in a small place, and high numbers of pedestrians or people on nearby buses may also be caught in the blast (as seen in the 7/7 bombings in London, where one device was set off as two trains passed each other). In addition, during the summer and winter windows are kept closed on buses to maximize air conditioning or heat, and this also maximizes the blast effect. [5] An article from the RAND Corporation graphically describes the effect:

“As a hail of shrapnel pierces flesh and breaks bones, the shock wave tears lungs and crushes other internal organs. When the bus's fuel tank explodes, a fireball causes burns, and smoke inhalation causes respiratory damage. All this is a significant return on a relatively modest investment. Two or three kilograms of explosive on a bus can kill as many people as twenty to thirty kilograms left on a street or in a mall or a restaurant.” [6]

Lastly, it is very difficult, because of practicality and cost, to screen all passengers, as compared to screening visitors to a building or event. Buses are far less secure because of their mobility and predictability – not only are buses exposed along miles and miles of routes with very little possibility of complete security, but it is also possible for terrorists to know their route in detail, since bus drivers are prided in consistency. In Israel the alertness of the public and improved screening techniques have led to a shift in tactics, but America is still on her learning curve and has yet to adopt the same level of preparedness for any type of terrorism as Israel. In addition, it is important to remember that many tactics that are used successfully in Israel may be considered too extreme for use on American soil (unless we begin to have large numbers of terrorist attacks).

While the tactical reasons for bus attacks are strong, the strategic rewards are possibly even stronger. Similar to the image

of the two towers of the World Trade Center, a school bus would represent an unforgettable target to the parents of the 24 million school children who ride to school each day. Just like the image of the two towers brings back the memory of 9/11, after a school bus attack every big yellow bus in America would remind us of the horror of the incident. America is perhaps more vulnerable to this not only because of our “it can’t happen here” attitude, but because of the use of standard yellow school bus designs across the country, which would lend even more to the power of imagery.

Outlining the Paradigm Shift

For America, 9/11 signaled a shift to what is often referred to as “the new terrorism” – something that had long occurred in other parts of the world but had not yet been driven home in America. The hijackings that had previously been characterized by negotiations and tactical endings have been seemingly replaced by a combination of hostage taking and suicide bombing. Examples can be seen in the flights taken hostage and used as huge suicide bombs on September 11th, 2001, as well as in the Beslan school ‘hostage crisis’ of September 1–3, 2005.

Likewise, the Chechen terrorists in Beslan, Russia in September 2004 were not willing to negotiate. While their true intentions can never be known, it seems that they only spoke with authorities outside the school for the purpose of prolonging the incident as long as possible and to make the Russian government look as helpless and menacing as possible. After the first day of the crisis, for example, a videocassette was tossed out of a window to the assembled military perimeter. The footage showed the elaborate network of bombs connected to foot pedal detonators that would set off explosions if the terrorist controlling it moved his foot – a tactical nightmare for any team planning on storming the school.

At no point during the crisis were serious demands given, other than a desire to speak with President Putin. The other demands were too extreme to be serious – for example demanding for a full Russian retreat from Chechnya. While there is certainly a real desire for this on the part of the Chechens, this served more as a “stump speech” than a demand likely to be met. While the

terrorists further confused matters by wearing masks – a sign of even the slightest chance of survival or escape – they stated repeatedly to the hostages that they came to the school planning to die.

Implications for America

John Giduck, who chronicled his visit to the scene of the attack in Terror at Beslan, has stated that America needs to understand that in this type of attack, people will die, and there will be no happy ending. In a nation where we are relatively new to terrorism and accustomed to “happy endings”, such an attack would strike a heavy blow to America. While the Russian government can stonewall independent inquiries and shift attention elsewhere, the anguish and frustration of a no-win hostage situation with no feasible demands would bring America to its knees.

The effect would be even more intense than 9/11, because of the presumed safety & innocence of our children combined with the high level of safety that we are accustomed to in the school transportation industry. Out of the approximately 800 children killed in motor vehicles during school travel hours, only five of those are killed while a passenger on a school bus. School buses represent 25% of miles traveled by students, but less than 2% of the fatalities. [7] With such a high success rate, anything but perfection is not accepted by the parents of America’s school bus riders, and a brutal terrorist attack as we have seen in other countries would have a huge effect.

Examining the Threat

It is clear that schools are a possible target for terrorists. Aside from Beslan and the dozens of other school attacks over the past 37 years, it has been reported that the U.S. military has found information in Iraq pertaining to U.S. schools, and in September 2004 the FBI notified school districts in six states that photographs, diagrams, and emergency plans had been found in the possession of unidentified individuals. [8] With institutions as large and prepared as the Georgia Institute of Technology posting their entire emergency plans on the internet, this is not surprising.

In addition, there have been hundreds of thefts of school bus radios in two states, along with an increase in thefts and vandalism of school buses and equipment across the U.S. This has obvious implications, including but not limited to the possibility that unknown individuals may be able to monitor or interfere with school bus communications, and even feed them false and dangerous instructions during or before an attack. [9] At the very least, this would allow terrorists to better understand and plan around the communications equipment of an intended target.

It is also clear that our school transportation systems are vulnerable to attack because of outdated equipment and lack of training. There have been countless incidents of violence and hostage taking on school buses across the country, including one where a student used a sword to hijack a bus and take it across state lines before he was stopped.

In another well-publicized incident, a Miami Special Needs bus driver was fooled into taking her bus and students on a 75-minute ride by a hostage-taker who forced his way on the bus but did not actually have a weapon. While she was praised in the media and by the school bus industry for handling the incident incredibly well, she apparently argued with and disobeyed the hostage-taker repeatedly, and if there was an actual weapon involved students may have been injured. [10] While we cannot judge her actions without knowing all details of the situation, this type of approach would clearly result in disaster if the attacker was an Islamist terrorist either sent or influenced by a group such as Al Qaeda.

Mohamad El Zahabhi

The clearest direct threat to the nation's school transportation system is the case of Mohamad Kamal El Zahabhi, a Lebanese national who has worked at various times as a Boston cab driver, a New York City auto mechanic, and a Minnesota school bus driver for First Student, a private contracting firm that provides bus service to schools across the country. While it is not clear whether his service as a bus driver was just one of many jobs that he held while in the U.S. or if it was part of an attempt to gain access to a school bus, his history gives us concern.

He first came to the U.S. in 1984, and paid a Texas woman to marry him so he could obtain his green card. After divorcing and admitting to fraud in 1988, he traveled to Afghanistan where he attended a terrorist training camp and later served as a sniper in combat in Afghanistan and Chechnya. He also told FBI agents that he had served as an instructor at a jihadist school. During this time he allegedly met with a few notable individuals, including Khalid Sheikh Muhammed, one of the originators of the 9/11 plot, and Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

After being injured in combat, el Zahabhi returned to New York City, where he worked with a relative at Drive Axle Rebuilders, a business that he used to order and ship to Afghanistan large quantities of heavy-duty field radios. While radios of the same type have been found by U.S. troops in Afghanistan, he denies knowledge of the shipments, saying that he never opened the packages that he was transferring. After serving as a cab driver in Boston from 1997 to 1998, he traveled again to Chechnya to serve in combat.

Returning to the U.S. in 2000, he moved to Minneapolis and on September 11, 2001 applied for a job as a bus driver with First Student. He had previously obtained his CDL and a HazMat certification under his Massachusetts driver's license, and passed an FBI background check. The FBI declines to comment as to why he was cleared, since the case is under investigation. After starting as a driver in late 2001, el Zahabhi failed to report to work after the winter break and was fired in January 2002. He returned in February 2002 and asked for his job back, but was denied.

While his intentions are not clear, his ties to al Qaeda members and activities gives rise to concern – for example the assistance he gave to Raed Hijazi, the man convicted of the failed millennium bombing plot in Jordan, when he allowed Hijazi to use his address in Massachusetts to receive mail and obtain a drivers license. He is currently being charged with lying to the FBI about this incident, along with other details.

Even if el Zahabhi did not intend to assist with or carry out a school attack, the fact that a jihadist combat veteran was able to become a bus driver in the U.S. is a sign of severe security gaps.

Summary of the National Response to the Threat

Federal Level

The federal government has responded to the threat of terrorism with policy and publications intended for bus drivers. The first move was to designate school buses as “mass transportation systems” as part of H.R. 3162, the USA PATRIOT ACT. This extends federal jurisdiction and penalties to anyone who wrecks, attacks, uses as a weapon, or otherwise endangers bus employees or passengers. [11]

They have also produced, through the Transportation Security Administration, the “Employee Guide to School Bus Security: Identifying Security Threats” along with a quick reference card detailing awareness, identification of suspicious behaviors or packages, and brief tips on how to respond to various situations.

In addition, the Department of Homeland Security has released three alerts notifying school buses of heightened states of danger, and the United States Department of Education released a letter to U.S. schools & buses after the attack at Beslan, suggesting that employees look out for suspicious behavior, and the letter outlines various methods of surveillance and planning that might be observable to school staff or drivers. [12]

State Level

There has been a larger effort on the part of several states, but these actions are usually disjointed and restricted to the state in which they are implemented. New Mexico, Minnesota, California, New York and Iowa have all either released a training video or implemented a training program for bus drivers on preventing and responding to terrorism. Georgia, the state with the largest state school safety center and the most comprehensive school bus security training program, has conducted numerous training conferences for drivers since the year 2000. [13]

Transportation Industry

It seems that the largest and most concerted efforts have been on the part of the school bus industry. The three largest trade

associations (the National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT), the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation (NASDPT) and the National School Transportation Association (NSTA)) have partnered with the Department of Homeland Security's "Highway Watch" program to extend coverage into a program called "School Bus Watch." Under the program, training is provided for drivers, who receive an identification card and number that they can use to report suspicious behavior to a national hotline, where information is passed on to local law enforcement.

The NASDPT has released two position papers indicating a heightened awareness of the threat and the need for a response, recognizing that school bus drivers are the first line of defense against a school transportation attack. The National Conference on School Transportation has also discussed creating a school bus equipment guide for first responders, detailing the different types and designs of school buses and giving responding personnel a way to know how to deal with, enter, immobilize and operate a bus if necessary.

Proposals

While much progress has been made since 9/11, it is clear that efforts are currently too thin and disjointed across the country. While some states have prepared their drivers substantially, the federal efforts have been too weak to have much effect. In addition, while industry efforts have been more widespread and in depth, they lack the mandate that a state or federal law might have. This leaves preparation up to the individual states, districts, and even schools themselves. As the Transportation Research Board noted:

"Supervisors must set the example for compliance with the policies and procedures and must make sure that employees follow suit. Supervisors must foster an environment that promotes awareness, preparedness, and due diligence by adhering to security policies and procedures daily." [14]

In addition to this lack of coverage and mandate, there has been a lot of focus on monitoring for unauthorized surveillance or suspicious activity. While this is obviously a very important step to take, schools may be too focused on this aspect, leading to a false

sense of security – since schools are doing so much, they may feel that they are doing enough.

There is also a lack of effective education for the general public. As Beslan has shown us, the lack of a secure perimeter around an incident can hamper effective law enforcement response, and we have even seen incidents in the U.S. where medical personnel have been forced to park their ambulances miles from an incident because of the rush of parents and well-wishers to the scene. Education on procedures such as family reunification protocols needs to be disseminated to the public more thoroughly.

While there is a clear threat to American schools of terrorism, it is important to remember that statistically the likelihood of an attack on a particular school is very low, especially when compared to the very real occurrences of death and injury that we know will occur every year in our schools. Schools should of course prepare for terrorism, but with a balanced approach, using the federally endorsed “All Hazards” approach, which breaks planning down into four phases: Mitigation, Prevention, Response and Recovery. [15] This type of approach deals with terrorism like any other incident – not minimizing its importance but placing it within the framework of current emergency response capabilities. This prevents the fragmentation of planning and response and the frivolous waste of funds that we have often seen in response to current events and threats that are on the forefront in the mind of the public.

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