

Transit Terrorism

In the 1990s America was startled by terrorist attacks on targets in the transport sector. It was not just the airports in Rome and Vienna that were the targets of international terrorism. The train station in Manhattan, New York was also the object of a terrorist bomb attack. More recently, in 1995 the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo targeted the Tokyo subway system using a homemade nerve agent. Following the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, the Los Angeles County Sheriffs' Department has greatly increased its ongoing efforts to ensure optimum safety of its passengers and employees. Additionally, in May 2003 the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department substantially expanded its services by providing law enforcement for the entire Los Angeles County transit system.

In large measure, terrorist incidents share some characteristics with large natural disasters. They are normally large in scale, long in duration, and complex in terms of the range of hazards presented. In responding to these situations the focus is on arriving swiftly; containing the situation; gathering information; establishing a command post; and handling it with training, experience and intuition. In most cases it is that simple. But taking a simplistic attitude toward terrorism may be our demise. Who could be fully prepared to approach the overwhelming carnage of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks? Terrorism is not simple to train for; and however remote its possibility, deputies must be prepared and drilled mentally to handle scenes like the Tokyo sarin attack.

As a result of these characteristics, these events thrust responders into new roles for which they may not have been properly prepared or equipped. To fully comprehend the totality of the terrorist threat, deputies must understand the terrorist value system, the weapons and delivery systems deployed, and how not to complicate the emergency by becoming another victim. Before tactical instruction, we must fully appreciate the total situation to which we are duty-bound to respond.

In Los Angeles County, the Transit Services Bureau has begun a steady regiment of Transit Terrorism Training beginning with basic history lessons. In order to interrupt the enemy's plans, it helps to know the enemy.

Types of Terrorists

In the United States, a distinction is made between international and domestic terrorists, with domestic terrorists originating within the United States and international terrorists originating abroad. Each of these categories will be discussed.



Photo by James R. Tourtellotte

Passenger and commercial truck crossings are monitored by the CBP to protect our nation's transport sector.

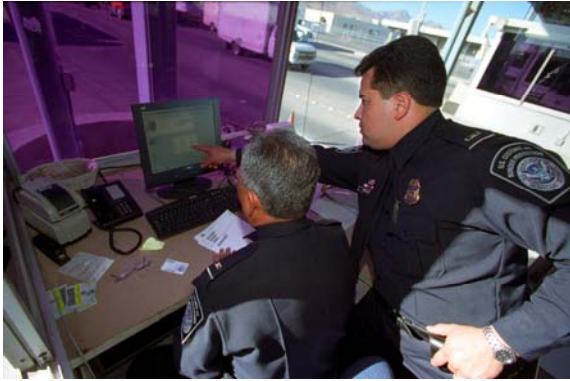


Photo by Gerald L. Nino

CBP officers are always working to ensure foreign-based terrorists do not enter the United States at our borders.

International Terrorists

International terrorism against the United States is that which is foreign-based and directed by countries or groups outside the United States and/or whose activities transcend national boundaries. The threat posed specifically by foreign terrorists has increased in the past three years and will continue in the foreseeable future.

The current international terrorist threat to the United States government, its people, and its interests can be divided into three major categories: (1) state sponsors of international terrorism, (2) formalized terrorist groups, and (3) loosely-affiliated Islamic extremists.

State Sponsored Terrorism

The first major threat to Americans comes from state sponsors of international terrorism. State sponsors include Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Libya, Cuba and North Korea. In recent years, terrorist activities by Cuba and North Korea appear to have declined, due primarily to the deteriorating economic situations in both countries. However, the activities of Iran, Syria, Sudan, and Libya have continued. These state sponsors view terrorism as a tool of foreign policy.

Past activities have included direct terrorist support and operations by official state agents. Following successful investigations, which have identified the activities of state agents involved in terrorism, state sponsors now generally seek to conceal their support of terrorism by relying on surrogates to conduct actual operations. State sponsors, however, continue to remain engaged in anti-Western terrorist activities by funding, organizing, networking and providing other support and instruction to many extremists.

A classic example of state sponsored terrorism was the attack on Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988, which killed 270 people. Two Libyan intelligence operatives, Lamem Fhimah and Abdel al-Megrahi, were indicted for their role in the attack.

Formalized Terrorist Groups

Formalized extremist groups pose the second major international terrorist threat to the United States. These autonomous organizations have their own infrastructures, personnel, financial arrangements and training facilities. They are able to plan and mount terrorist campaigns overseas and support terrorist operations inside the United States.

Extremist groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, the Egyptian al-Gamat al-Ismaiyya, and the Palestinian Hamas have placed supporters inside the United States who could be used to support an act of terrorism here.

Hezbollah is one of the most dangerous of these groups. Hezbollah has staged numerous anti-United States terrorist attacks, including the suicide truck-bombing of the United States Embassy and the United States Marine Corps barracks in Lebanon in 1983 and the United States Embassy annex in Lebanon in 1984. Elements of the group were also responsible for the kidnapping and

detention of United States hostages in Lebanon.

Islamic Extremists

The final major international terrorist threat to the United States stems from loosely affiliated Islamic terrorists, such as the World Trade Center bombers and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef. These extremists are neither surrogates of, nor strongly influenced by, any one nation. They have the ability to tap into a variety of official and private resource bases in order to facilitate terrorist acts against United States interests.

Loosely affiliated extremists may pose the most urgent international terrorist threat to the United States at this time since they are relatively unknown to law enforcement. They have the ability to travel freely, obtain a variety of identities, and recruit sympathizers from various countries and factions.

Some of these extremists in the United States are developing or experimenting with advanced communications, electronic mail and the Internet. For example, Shayke Omar Abdel Rahman solicited monies for his defense through the Internet during his trial for the planned multiple attacks against New York City landmarks and United States government facilities.

Domestic Terrorists

Domestic terrorist groups are those which are based and which operate entirely within the United States or its territories and whose activities are directed at elements of the United States government or its civilian population. The threat posed by domestic terrorist groups has remained significant over the past several years. Domestic terrorist groups represent interests spanning the full political spectrum and include social issues and concerns. The current domestic terrorist threat primarily comes from right-wing extremist groups, militia groups and special interest groups.



Oklahoma City, OK, April 26, 1995 -- Search and Rescue crews work to save those trapped beneath the debris, following the Oklahoma City bombing. FEMA News Photo

Right-Wing Extremist Groups

A basic philosophical tenet of many right-wing extremist groups is a belief in the superiority of the white race and that blacks, Jews and other ethnic minorities are inferior racially, mentally, physically and spiritually. Much of their philosophy flows from a racist, anti-Semitic religion known as “Christian Identity.” Christian Identity teaches that white non-Jews are God’s chosen race and that Jews are the offspring of Satan.

Many right-wing extremist groups also espouse anti-government sentiments. These groups refer to the federal government as the Zionist Occupation Government and claim that it is controlled by Jewish interests. A number of right-wing groups also believe that the federal government is bent on stripping constitutional rights from individual citizens of the United States.

In an attempt to live apart from “inferior people,” some right-wing groups advocate creating a separate nation from the five states comprising the northwest region of the United States — Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

Right-wing extremist groups believe that either an economic and/or social collapse, which will bring about the biblical Armageddon, is imminent. Therefore, they routinely engage in survivalist and/or paramilitary training to ensure the survival of the white race and/or United States.

Among the right-wing extremist groups operating in the United States are the Army of Israel, the Aryan Nations, the Texas Aryan Brotherhood, the California Militia, the Viper Militia, the Mountaineer Militia, the Republic of Texas, Our One Supreme Court, the Texas Constitutional Militia, the Utah Free Militia, the North Idaho Militia group and the Freemen.



Right-wing extremist groups think they are exempt from the laws and regulations of the U.S. government, as seen in this tattoo of a skinhead hitting a policeman.

Militia Groups

Since 1992, the United States has experienced an exponential growth of militia groups. While the majority of militia members are law-abiding citizens, there are a small percentage of members within militia groups who advocate and conspire to commit violent criminal acts. Of particular concern is the potential for militias to be infiltrated by extremist who seek to exploit militias and their members in order to further their own terrorist agendas.

While militia groups are often multi-racial, they are predominately white. They generally view themselves as “sovereign” citizens who are exempt from the laws and regulations of the United States government. Militia members

often subscribe to the theory that the federal government is in a conspiracy with the United Nations that would result in the creation of a one-nation world government or new world order. This one-world government would use foreign troops in the United States to seize all privately owned weapons and imprison and execute patriotic militia members.

Many militia groups advocate stockpiling weapons and explosives and conducting paramilitary training as part of their preparation for what they believe will be an inevitable armed conflict with the government. Some militia groups openly advocate the overthrow of the federal government. Militia members and cells are engaged in a wide variety of criminal activities. These include the illegal sale and purchase of automatic weapons; issuing threats against federal and elected officials; the illegal transportation of explosives; bombings; destruction of government property; and the filing of spurious lawsuits designed to harass law enforcement, elected officials, and others in addition to disrupting the courts. Some militia members engage in fraudulent financial schemes to raise funds. Others have committed armed robberies of banks and armored cars.

Special-Interest Terrorist Groups

Special interest terrorist groups engage in criminal activity to bring about specific narrowly focused social or political changes. They differ from more traditional domestic terrorist groups,

which seek more wide-ranging political changes.

It is the willingness to commit criminal acts that separates special interest terrorist groups from other law-abiding groups that often support the same popular issues. By committing criminal acts, these terrorists believe that they can force various segments of society to change attitudes about issues considered important to them.

The existence of these types of groups often does not come to law enforcement attention until after an act is committed and the individual or group leaves a claim of responsibility. Membership in a group may be limited to a very small number of co-conspirators or associates. Consequently, acts committed by special interest terrorists present unique challenges to various law enforcement entities.

Unfortunately, these types of terrorist acts are growing more prevalent. An example of special interest terrorist activity is the February 2, 1992 arson of the mink research facility at Michigan State University. Rodney Coronado, a member of the Animal Liberation Front, pled guilty to arson charges on July 3, 1995. Founded in England in 1976, the Animal Liberation Front is a militant animal rights group. Another incident was the arson of a vast San Diego, Calif. apartment complex on August 6, 2003. The Earth Liberation Front claimed responsibility for this as an act of ecoterrorism.



Concrete barriers in front of the Ronald Reagan Federal Courthouse in Orange County, Calif. are used as a precaution against criminal acts by terrorists.

Terrorist Motives

When perpetrating an attack, the typical terrorist strategy is to convey messages, reach objectives or influence political affairs. Traditional terrorist tactics include assassinations, hijackings, detonation of explosive devices, kidnappings and threats of violence. Tactics have shifted over time, largely in response to security countermeasures established by targeted organizations and nations along with changes in the availability of weapons.

Changing motives and objectives have also influenced the tactics selected by terrorist groups. In the 1970s terrorist groups, such as those associated with the rise of Arab nationalism in the Middle East, used assassination and hostage taking as a primary means to affect political outcomes. In the 1980s, car bombings and hijackings were used to support a variety of causes in the Middle East, Latin America and Western Europe.

Recent trends indicate the potential for terrorists to expand their capabilities by utilizing chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. Since 1990, casualties associated with terrorist violence have greatly increased. This may indicate an increased sophistication and a focus on tactics that generate high-order casualties. Another emerging trend is the use of virtual and cyber attacks on computer networks. Over the last three decades bombings have been, and remain, the terrorist tactic of choice.

No community is immune from the potential of a terrorist incident. Terrorists attack symbolic targets including military or government facilities; important cultural, historic, or religious sites; and significant technological symbols such as power plants. The current trend toward large-scale attacks that generate high casualties places large government buildings,

shopping malls, stadiums and transportation facilities at especially high levels of risk.



Transit systems constitute a significant terrorist target.

Training Responders

By understanding chemical and biological agents, patrol deputies have a better chance to identify their risks and make informed and competent decisions when faced with danger.

The typical terrorist strategy, when perpetrating a chemical or biological attack, is to make a statement by killing and injuring as many innocent people as possible.

Another terrorist strategy, however, is to perpetrate limited and random attacks on innocent people to heighten fear and terror.

Contaminated mail, for example, is a relatively poor means of disseminating agents. Nevertheless, the paranoia that ensued regarding mail delivery illustrates that even small-scale attacks involving a biological agent can have a significant psychological impact on the public. In addition, these incidents have increased public concern about terrorism in general and have further resulted in the allocation of significant resources to counter such threats.

Terrorists often choose targets that, in and of themselves, are not generally considered dangerous or hazardous and are relatively easy for the general populace to access. These targets are located in the vicinity of large crowds that could be injured or killed as a result of the terrorist event.

For obvious reasons, transit systems constitute a significant terrorist target. When a train deputy receives a radio call for a heart attack victim in the Red Line Subway and arrives on the scene to find multiple victims with the same symptoms, he may competently conclude that the situation is not normal. Without an adept assessment, chances are he will become part of the problem, needlessly exposing other responders to harms way. Officers must be aware of that ahead of time. By remaining alert and well trained before arrival at dangerous situations, responder casualties will be reduced and more victims will be saved.

The ethical question of retreating in the face of danger is more easily understood and becomes less complicated when responders are armed with the knowledge of the enemy, the diversity of employed tactics, and an understanding of the potential weapon systems used. With a combination of knowledge and physical security awareness, responders stand a more successful chance when responding to threats, reacting to incidents and controlling their consequences.