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Train stations are no place for armed police

by CHRISTIAN WOLMAR • MARCH 12, 2012



Armed police are now a familiar sight at London's major stations – but who are they protecting? Photograph: Lindsey Parnaby/EPA

Surprise, surprise, the Olympics security budget is [reaching Olympian proportions](#). It was bound to because, as the date approaches, no one wants to take risks. And it's assumed the best way of eliminating risks is to throw yet more money and more bodies at the problem, with little relation to reality or proper risk assessment.

A good case in point is the recent introduction of armed police at mainline stations. This is a clear escalation of the public deployment of armed officers, a decision made without any public discussion or, indeed, announcement. There have been armed policeman at airports for some time, and around Whitehall, but now they are seen at several of the bigger stations, including St Pancras and Euston.

This was not a decision taken because of operational requirements or a raised threat level. A senior officer I was chatting to the other day stressed that this was a decision made by Cobra, the cabinet emergency committee, not by the police. If there is an attack during the Olympics, then Cameron et al want to be able to get up in public and say that they had done everything possible to try to prevent an attack. But having armed police in mainline stations does nothing of the sort. One only has to examine the various scenarios to realise that there are very few, if any, types of terrorist attack where a couple of gun-toting coppers in a public place would be able to make a difference.

Take the old-style IRA attacks of placing a bomb, either timed to explode at a particular moment, or triggered by a more sophisticated mechanism. While this is now more difficult because of the widespread use of CCTV and the lack of suitable litter bins, it is not impossible – and certainly armed police make no difference.

Then there are the 7/7 type suicide bombers. Again, armed police would be no use. Nor would they help in the type of [Madrid attack](#) on trains where the terrorists simply left bags in crowded places. A [Glasgow airport-style assault](#) with a van and explosives would also not be prevented by armed police unless they were very lucky and happened to be in just the right place.

Their only possible use might be in a [Mumbai-type assault](#) by heavily armed men. However, not only is it unlikely that terrorists would be able to get such weaponry in the UK, but also if they were that well organised, they would probably manage to eliminate the cops. There is also the question of collateral damage, as the military call it, or friendly fire. The idea that even very highly trained officers would be able to use their guns – in anger for the first time – in a crowded station environment against attackers without hurting or killing other people is fanciful.

Then there is the issue of targets. The IRA started bombing bizarre places because central London was getting too hot for its operatives. So the Finchley Road, West Hampstead and, of all places, Staples Corner (where the A1 meets the North Circular), were the target of IRA attacks.

Terrorists now know not to target the really big stations, but there are dozens of others where an attack would attract equal publicity. They will realise that the likes of Exeter, Guildford and Southend – even Fenchurch Street or Clapham Junction – are unlikely to have armed policemen. That, however, leads to the same type of logic that has resulted in this latest deployment. As targets are eliminated through greater protection, it becomes tempting to deploy more and more armed police, and spending on "security" grows.

So for whose protection is this deployment? The answer is clearly the politicians' backsides. Either way, the terrorists win. If there is an attack, they will have succeeded in getting past this new security. If there isn't, they will have succeeded in destroying another small piece of what makes up our democracy.

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