

Thwarted armed assault on a Paris-bound train

EVENT SUMMARY

- On August 21, 2015 at roughly 17:45, 26-year-old Ayoub El-Khazzani opened fire in an attempt to carry out a mass shooting on a Thalys high speed train carrying over 550 passengers through the Oignies region of France en route from Amsterdam to Paris.

- The attack was thwarted by the brave efforts of US Service Members Spencer Stone, of the Air Force, and Alek Skarlatos, of the Oregon National Guard, along with Anthony Sadler and two others, a French national and a Briton who charged, tackled and subdued the suspect. The three childhood friends were vacationing in Europe and have since been awarded the Legion of Honor, France's highest honor, for their roles in thwarting the attack.



Spencer Stone leaving the central hospital in Lille, France one day after the shooting

- Air Force Airman Spencer Stone ran at the gunman and sustained injuries from multiple stabbings with a box cutter. An additional three people were injured in the attack, including one gunshot wound victim, who is in stable condition. Stone also provided medical



El-Khazzani subdued by passengers on board the train.

care following the incident and checked the train cars for additional weapons.

- El-Khazzani is believed to have boarded the train in Belgium carrying a Kalashnikov assault weapon with nine magazines of ammunition, a Luger automatic pistol with extra ammo and a box cutter.
- El-Khazzani was arrested by police at a train station in Arras and is now in custody.
- El-Khazzani has been identified as a Moroccan national. His DNA and fingerprints were already on file with Spanish authorities and had a police record for drug dealing.
- According to reports, Spanish authorities had advised French intelligence about the suspect in February 2014 due to 'his connections to the radical Islamist movement.' French authorities placed El-Khazzani on a watch list of potentially dangerous individuals.
- According to counterterrorism officials in Europe, there are strong indications to suggest that El-Khazzani traveled from Europe to Turkey between May-July 2015 with the intention of joining ISIS in Syria. His movements have not yet been verified and it is not clear whether he reached Syria. El-Khazzani is believed to have lived in the southern city of Algeciras in Spain in 2014 where he frequented a mosque under surveillance by Spanish authorities.
- An attorney speaking on behalf of El-Khazzani announced that he was homeless and the incident was an attempt to rob the train and then shoot out a window to escape.
- According to reports, the crew aboard the train barricaded themselves in their staffroom and locked the door. Train staff has since been accused of abandoning passengers. The train company, Thalys, denies the allegations.

INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

- Attacks on public transportation are not a new phenomenon. For decades, public transit systems including train and underground systems around the world have served as a principal venue for terrorism among other crimes. The sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway and the bombing of the Paris Metro in the 1990s drew mass media attention to the vulnerability of the mass transit system to attack. Ten years later, the deadly Madrid train bombing in 2004 and the London underground bombings the following year served as watershed events, highlighting the need for heightened mass transit security. Today, the threats faced by public transportation and mass transit systems have significantly increased.

Policing and securing mass transit poses a considerable challenge. Due to the public nature of mass transit systems and the fact that they are used by millions of passenger daily, implementing screening measures is a complex task. The volume of passengers and the need to maintain efficient throughput make it almost impossible for transit operators to employ many of the security tactics used by at airports or other hard target infrastructures.

Currently, security in the public transportation and mass transit systems is ill-equipped to deal with the growing threats. The key challenge of securing mass transit systems from criminal or terrorist attacks is daunting, not because the systems cannot be made much more secure but because in doing so the systems will become much less attractive to riders who have alternative means of transportation.

- We know that trains are a convenient mode of short, medium and long distance travel across Europe, particularly for tourists. We can assume that in addition to the three Americans who thwarted the assault, many of the other hundreds of passengers on board the train were tourists. Given that at this time we are not aware of any intended target or targeted group, we may assume that the assault was carried out indiscriminately.
- We do not know at this time if security officers were deployed to this specific train or are deployed to trains in Europe, in a capacity similar to air marshals on board aircrafts. It seems likely that train employees do not receive training on security measures in the event of a terror attack, armed assault or similar scenario.
- El-Khazzani was able to procure access to the assault weapon and automatic pistol he carried on board the train. We do not know at this time how he acquired the weapons. An attorney speaking on his behalf stated that El-Khazzani found the suitcase full of guns at a local hangout in a Brussels park.

It should be noted that a Belgian arms dealer was responsible for supplying most of the weapons used by the gunmen who perpetrated Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015. A search of his apartment turned up documents linking him to the gunman who killed four people at the kosher supermarket in Paris as well as to the rocket-propelled grenade launcher and Kalashnikov automatic assault rifles used in the attack on the Paris headquarters of Charlie Hebdo.

- According to the three Americans, 'El-Khazzani clearly had no firearms training whatsoever.' However, had he been able to operate the weapons and had it not been for the heroic effort of those on board, the incident may have had catastrophic consequences including mass casualties, particularly due to the kind of firepower the suspect was carrying at the time of the attack. There were also possibilities that the situation could have developed into a hostage situation or the assailant could also take control of the train and forced a high speed crash.
- The fact unarmed but aware and trained persons can thwart an armed terrorist is significant. It sends a very important message for the free world stand against terrorism. On 4th July 2002 an unarmed sky marshal tackled and engaged an armed terrorist at Los Angeles airport preventing him carrying out his attack until an armed officer arrived and shot him.

- El-Khazzani was on the radar of counterterrorism officials in a reported three countries due to potential involvement in radical Islamist movements. This incident raises questions as to how he was able to board the train unchecked and undetected while loaded with weapons.
- Given the amount of weaponry and ammunition that El-Khazzani was carrying at the time of the attack it is possible that he may have been observed behaving suspiciously or carrying a heavy load that may have attracted attention.
- It is clear that developed countries across Europe are becoming more vulnerable to terrorism in recent years, due in part to the rising power of ISIS and other Islamist extremist groups. Between January 7 – 9, 2015, gunmen claiming affinity to Daish carried out a series of coordinated attacks in Paris in which 16 people were killed in attacks on the magazine Charlie Hebdo and a kosher grocery store. Three suspects involved in the attack were killed by police in separate standoffs. In February 2015, a double shooting occurred in Copenhagen, Denmark in which two people were killed and multiple others wounded. The first attack occurred during a free-speech debate attended by Swedish artist Lars Bilks, who had depicted the prophet Muhammed as a dog in a 2007 cartoon. The second shooting took place outside the city's central synagogue.

These incidents illustrate the threat of homegrown jihadism in Europe. We know that many European citizens are leaving Europe for Syria to train and fight alongside ISIS. A growing fear among European governments is that these recruits will return home to plan terrorist attacks on European soil.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- This attack, among other assaults carried out in recent years in Europe, demonstrate that it is possible for trained, ideologically motivated extremists to acquire weapons and to carry out attacks on soft targets throughout Europe. It is necessary to consider the domino effect that this attack may have on others who may be inspired to launch similar terror attacks.
- Protecting mass transit systems is a key issue and needs to be examined with risk management tools. As such, implementing security measures should be carried out according to designated threat levels.
- The mass transit system today must find a balance between the need for optimal, convenient use and cost efficiency and the need to ensure maximum safety and security to passengers, workers and infrastructure. However, the scope and diversity of existing threats to mass transit systems makes any effort to defend against all of them expensive, insufficient and not cost effective.
- Effective mass transit security can best be achieved by incorporating a coherent, layered security system into transportation operations that is designed to deter potential attackers and terrorists. Layered security, which combines elements of physical, technology

and cognitive people screening methodologies into a comprehensive system, improves security overall and has the greatest potential to deter and protect.

- It may be worthwhile to incorporate cognitive methodologies into the security apparatus such as behavioral pattern recognition. Identification of out of the ordinary behaviors or other irregularities could lead to early detection of potential threats. Utilizing behavior pattern recognition would be the most effective if both security and non-security communities are trained for it.
- Train employees should be trained on emergency procedures which include scenarios involving armed assault and/or terrorism. In addition, it may be worthwhile training and deploying armed security personnel on board trains.