

Do Terrorism Warnings Work?

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Are we safer at Code Orange than Code Yellow or because subway announcements tell us to say something if we see something suspicious? Did the State Department do travelers headed to Europe a favor last week by [telling them that they should watch out for terrorist attacks?](#) Does exhorting the public to be vigilant add a layer of defense against terrorism that justifies the anxiety and false leads it causes?

I went on Voice of America's [Encounter](#) program last Thursday to argue that the answer to all these questions is no. I said that vigilance is overrated and that if authorities are going to warn us about terrorism, they should be far more specific. The other guest, [Frank Cilluffo](#), a homeland security expert at George Washington University, articulately disagreed with me on that and some of the other skeptical views I expressed about US counterterrorism policy. It was an unusually substantive radio discussion that broadcast only overseas. So I'm posting it here:



One point Cilluffo made that I failed to respond to on the air is that terrorism alerts disrupt attacks by causing terrorists to alter their plans. That is to me the best argument for alerts. But I would like to see the claim substantiated. I don't see why a general alert in Europe would cause terrorists to slow or cancel plans to attack there, but maybe terrorists see things differently. Police actions or security at airports or train stations seem more likely to disrupt to attackers. Those measures don't require everyone to worry.

I'm glad to see Paul Pillar [agrees](#).

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