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Glasgow Airport Attack:

implications for centralised screening

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Centralised Screening:

queue creation, target creation

by Philip Baum



The only thing surprising about the attack of 30th June in Glasgow (no doubt it will soon be referred to as 30/6... or 6/30 by our American cousins) was that it was a vehicle that was used rather than a pedestrian suicide bomber simply walking into a crowded check-in hall.

Ever since the so-called "alleged liquid explosive plot" of last August, security experts have been voicing growing concern about the transformation of airport terminals into attractive targets for the suicidally inclined. Granted that the key aim of the al Qaeda brand of terrorism is to kill as many people as possible, why should their followers make things complicated for themselves by having to construct devices that can by-pass security when the security queues themselves can be targeted?

In the United Kingdom, even the cross-party House of Commons Transport Committee has expressed concerns about the issue. In its July report they stated that, "Moving passengers more swiftly through to airside will, in itself, reduce the threat. Speeding up check-in times and reducing the security queue should be a priority for airports and airlines."

The same report implies that it is the passengers, the airports and the airlines that are to blame for the masses congesting terminal public areas rather than the legislation. Passengers are, supposedly, not appreciating the threat and make life difficult for screeners by not divesting themselves of prohibited items and substances prior to screening. Airports and airlines, meanwhile, are not deploying sufficient staff to process passengers in a timely fashion. There is no criticism of the regulator and the raft of ridiculous security measures introduced that are the real cause of delays and lengthy queues. In fact, "reducing the security queue should be a priority for" governments.

There are certainly areas in which airports are culpable. There are, for example, a significant number of landside attractions that do little to discourage 'meeters and greeters' and even passengers from vacating public areas. The presence of coffee shops, pharmacies, book stores and the like could all be housed within the airside areas. Then again, by doing so, are we not giving in to terrorism? Why shouldn't airport terminals be shopping malls? Airports are businesses and need to make money. They may be iconic targets but so too are the sports stadiums, theatre districts, tourist sites and city centres. Crowds amass at them too and we neither want, nor should, close down our commercial operations because of the threat of terrorism.

I do, however, take issue with the creation of crowds for unnecessary reasons and through illogical security practices. And one of the prime examples of this is the concept of centralised screening.

It is generally accepted that security checks can be effected in one of three locations within an airport terminal - at the boarding gate, at the entrance to one of the airport piers (within which there are a number of gates) or at the main entrance to the passenger concourse before the shopping experience commences.

The latter enables us to ensure that the passenger concourse is supposedly sterile and is certainly the most cost-effective solution as it limits equipment redundancy to a minimum and provides for the optimum cross-utilisation of security staff. However, whilst economical, it is also the weakest formula.

Centralised screening creates a production line where all passengers, regardless as to their destination, are screened in a similar fashion. This deprives the screener of an opportunity to assess whether or not the passenger matches the baseline for a given

flight. Passengers flying to Reykjavik dress, act and behave differently to those flying to Johannesburg; those en route to Dubai display different characteristics to those travelling to Rio de Janeiro. Yet the screeners are, normally, blissfully unaware as to where the passenger is going. As long as they don't cause an alarm, they're all treated as equals.

Another inherent limitation of such a screening approach includes the potential for having to evacuate an entire terminal building should a person manage to pass through the checkpoint having caused an alarm yet fail to be stopped. This is not as infrequent an occurrence as one might imagine and many screeners admit that they are unlikely to raise the alarm for fear of retribution for causing tens if not hundreds of flight delays due to a minor 'administrative' slip-up.

Gate screening offers airports the advantage of effecting security controls at the last moment before boarding, the time at which an individual with bad intent is likely to be displaying the most behavioural indicators. It enables us to screen individuals after they have visited the airport duty free shops and after, in certain airports, they have come into contact with arriving passengers.

It is also fairer. Take London Heathrow Terminals 3 or 4 as an example. Why should a passenger flying (on a small aircraft) to Oslo or Amsterdam have to arrive at the airport two hours or more before their flight just because there are thousands of people travelling on wide-bodied jets to the United States or Far East at the same time? Travel out of Amsterdam Schiphol, where gate screening is the norm for non-Schengen destinations, and one only stands in line if there is a full passenger load on your specific flight.

With the potential Glasgow inferno in mind, by-products of centralised screening are the

queues that we witness backing up into public areas; we are creating a target rather than effecting security.

Of course, it's easy to blame the airports for opting for the more economic solution. For as long as the focus of their attention rests on the identification of a list of prohibited items, rather than on the determination of passenger intent, production-line security makes sense. It's human automation in action. That mindset is not the airports doing. It's not even any one regulator. It is the industry as a whole.

I write this in the height of the European summer holiday season. Fortunately, most people have not been put off by the terrorist threat and are flooding our airport terminals and heading, albeit slowly, to destinations where they can get away from the rat race. Yet, amongst their number are those who are calculating, observing, surveying and plotting the next attack against aviation. They will be spurred on to succeed and to avenge the number of failed missions, not one of which was prevented by airport security, but rather by the intelligence services, a few brave individuals and their own inadequacies: Richard Reid, the liquid plot of 2006, Glasgow...

It is a thankless task to manage an airport or airline security operation. Everybody is quick to criticise and the success stories are rarely paraded. According to a Welsh proverb, "Bad news goes about in clogs, good news in stockinged feet". Yet, reports from the United States of the identification of suspicious activity and bizarre discoveries, including block cheese, are both encouraging and worrying. Encouraging in that these strange trends are being noted and worrying in that it demonstrates that the terrorist is always one step ahead.

Back in the United Kingdom, if the queues were not enough for the British Airports Authority, they now have to face the prospect of around 5,000 environmental campaigners setting up camp on 14th August in the Camp for Climate Action. Whilst the campaigners may have a worthy cause and have a democratic right to protest against the construction of Heathrow's third runway and airline emissions contribution to global warming, they are simply adding to the stress on the airport and police. Their protest must be allowed to go ahead. If not, terrorists will have managed to prevent democracy in action. (Although not for this audience, I also feel that the environmentalists have a social responsibility, that goes beyond

global warming, to think carefully about where, when and how to protest without overstressing an already stretched security infrastructure.)

We must count ourselves lucky that those who attempted to drive a Jeep into the terminal in Glasgow in June did little more than sound an alarm. They chose a relatively small airport (perhaps in Scotland because Gordon Brown, Britain's new Prime Minister, is himself a Scot and had just assumed the reins of power the same week) and were prevented from achieving their goal by low-tech security – bollards and the actions of a few heroic individuals. The alleged perpetrators, as we now know, were professional men – doctors; intelligent, yet misguided individuals.

Like the alleged terrorists, our professional duty is to preserve lives. Yet, unlike the terrorist community, we seem trapped in the past. According to a Hebrew proverb, "Do not confine your children to your own learning, for they were born in another time". In designing the aviation security system of the future we must remember that those who we are currently deploying to operate our checkpoints are not primarily looking for an armed revolutionary hoping to grab the headlines for a few days before releasing his captives; they were born in different times.

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