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international

The Journal of Airport & Airline Security

[www.asi-mag.com](http://www.asi-mag.com)

October 2006 : Volume 12 Issue 5

## Liquid Explosives:

identifying the likely culprit



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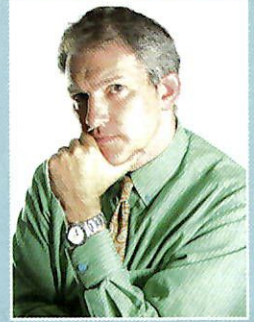
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# Contingency Planning: responding to the next plot



By Philip Baum

**I'm not about to second guess the United Kingdom's response to the latest alleged attempt to destroy airliners departing its airports bound for the United States. If there was a plot and it did involve liquid explosives then, in the knowledge that existing technologies and procedures were not up to the task of detecting such substances, the only option open to the authorities was to ban such items from being taken into the aircraft cabin.**

Given that, back in 2004, 12 tubes of toothpaste injected with a mixture of C4 and kerosene were found in an Abu Sayyaf safehouse in the Philippines, the concern about such devices is more than understandable. After all, much of the planning for Oplan Bojinka and even 911 took place in the Philippines.

The reality is, however, that a ban on liquids and gels is not only unsustainable, but unwarranted. Whilst asking passengers to place bladed-items in their checked baggage is achievable and not a major hindrance (as few such items can be considered in-flight or overnight "essentials"), the same does not apply to those items recently added to the prohibited list. Last week, I flew to Helsinki for less than 24 hours and I had a choice - to check in a bag with one shirt, a change of underwear and my toiletries in it, or carry them as hand baggage and buy toothpaste on arrival; I opted for the latter. For what security gain?

Result: I cast an eye on the screeners in a new light. Ah, poor souls, they wouldn't be able to distinguish between a suicide bomber and a business traveller! Or so the regulations would imply.

Worse still, the number of conversations taking place between screeners and obviously genuine passengers about bottles of water and gel pens was an alarming waste of precious time and resources. The new regulations simply distract screeners attention from the real threats. We are being ridiculed, and

rightly so, by the commentators and cartoonists, many of whom seem to have a better grip on "real" security than the so-called professionals.

I make no apology for addressing the subject of profiling in two subsequent lead editorials. Last issue I outlined the need for common sense security based on positive profiling. The response has been, in part, reassuring as privately and "off the record" most industry professionals (i.e. the airline and airport security managers and aviation consultants, rather than the governmental officials who seem to respond with either what they think the public would like to see done or with vast quantities of security theory or with political statements that purport to say a lot but actually say very little) seem to share my feelings of despair regarding the reluctance to incorporate profiling into the security regime. However, the fact that so many comments are made "off the record" is also disturbing; there is an understandable reluctance to rock the apple cart. But maybe it's time the cart was rocked.

Aside from media-influenced diatribe about the unacceptable nature of excessive focussing on certain ethnic groups, for which profiling is condemned, there is the issue of cost. Firstly, I believe (and I'd like to see a study effected), that it could save money. Secondly, if we talk about cost, how much has the War on Terror cost us?

A few years ago I attended a meeting in Tel Aviv where those responsible for Ben Gurion airport security justified their high expenditure on aviation security by arguing that Britain or the US may be able to "accept" a Lockerbie-style incident every decade or so as part of life. Such events are painful, especially for the families involved, but are quickly consigned to the history books by all those outside the aviation industry. Israel, however, could not accept that. A failure of its airport security regime would result not only in the deaths of those onboard the flight targeted, but

also many more in the inevitable regional war that would follow. It would seem times have changed and war is now the probable outcome, possibly not one confined to one specific region. So, perhaps it's time to look at the real financial implications of our aviation security regime.

This ultimately boils down not only to the procedures and technologies, but also the staff deployed. In the vast majority of countries around the globe, including many of the G8 countries, a job in aviation security is still at the bottom of the pile. We are not attracting the type of people one would ideally choose to make life or death decisions. Many screeners simply don't care for anything other than the pay cheque.

None of us are bystanders. Every citizen may be affected by an aviation tragedy. The chances of my being on an aircraft targeted by terrorists is extremely slim and I'm more likely to die en route to the airport in a car crash. But, given that terrorists WILL attack aviation again, the impact of such an event will certainly affect me and my loved ones even if I never had any intention of flying or had never been airborne in my life. Many of those servicemen who have lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan have lost them as a result of America's decision to ignore the threat posed to its domestic aviation security system.

It is nigh on criminal that states employ government agencies to secure their borders - after people have disembarked an airliner - yet fail to do the same before people board a flight. Why? Because they know the task is monumental and, should they fail, who would there be left to blame? If a customs agent misses some drugs or an immigration officer fails to detect a forged travel document, nobody will know. But, if a hijacker and/or bomb make it onto a flight, the whole world will be demanding answers. Easier, it would seem, to have a scapegoat.

However cosmetic the security regime may be in the developed world, the situation in

the developing world is far worse. Whilst many states may meet the standards set out in Annex 17, we must remember that those standards are simply the lowest common denominator. Despite a variety of active auditing programmes, how many airports are ever blacklisted?

States concerned about the lives of their nationals should not be satisfied with auditing their own airports. They should be demanding that their carriers operating to airports overseas where security is known to be ineffective either implement security measures commensurate with those at home by screening people at the door of the aircraft or ceasing to operate to that country. The Americans have done this for years - even at airports that offer a far higher standard of security than exists "at home". This may place an additional financial burden on the airlines, but the disparity in international screening standards demands it.

I fear, however, that economic factors will override security necessities.

It is important to bear in mind that some countries, including the aforementioned Philippines, would not have been able to

**“many of those servicemen who have lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan have lost them as a result of America’s decision to ignore the threat posed to its domestic aviation security system”**

prevent an August 10th-style plot given that ‘conspiracy to commit a terrorist act’ is not a crime everywhere and the alleged plotters would not necessarily have been arrested. The crime would have had to be in motion. This places an even greater burden on the screeners.

The big question posed by the events of 10th August 2006 is not what to do about liquid explosives, but how to handle a whole range of possible scenarios for which plots have yet to be uncovered or realised.

I sincerely hope that the authorities are actively discussing how they will respond should a suicide bomber detonate their deadly load in a check-in hall, resulting in mass casualties. Likewise should a suicide bomber succeed in the detonation of an internally carried device? Or an airport employee

infiltrate an IED airside? (They seem to be very good at taking things away from the secure zone!) Or a device be infiltrated onto a flight through air cargo? What about a chemical or biological attack? Or a crewmember, perhaps even a pilot, hijacking a flight? Or, or, or...

There may be emergency plans to cope with the immediate aftermath of any such acts, but we now have to look at each of these, and many other scenarios, as being distinct possibilities. In the light of this, and considering the mayhem caused this August, we need to decide now what measures we will then introduce to safeguard aviation against them in the future.

Then again, if such measures exist, why don't we implement them now and limit the potential of such plots becoming other events we react to belatedly?

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