

AIRPORT WORLD

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Friend or foe?

Is profiling the most misunderstood security measure in our arsenal? Philip Baum unravels the mysteries of arguably the most controversial word in aviation security.

Mention profiling and one immediately thinks of El Al Israel Airlines' security operation. Yet, whilst widely lauded as being the 'best in the business', few other airlines or states would wish to see an El Al style security enforced on their passengers. Nor need they. After all, even the Israelis are beginning to accept that their own system needs to adapt to the 21st Century, given ever-increasing passenger numbers and less predictable enemies.

That said, we would be foolish to disregard the fact that, despite it being the most attractive target of all the airlines to hijack, since the inception of the passenger profiling system there has never been a successful hijacking of an El Al aircraft. However, the Israelis are quick to argue that profiling alone is insufficient and regard sky marshals as a necessary last line of defence. They proved their worth in the November 17, 2002,

attempted hijacking of an El Al flight bound for Istanbul.

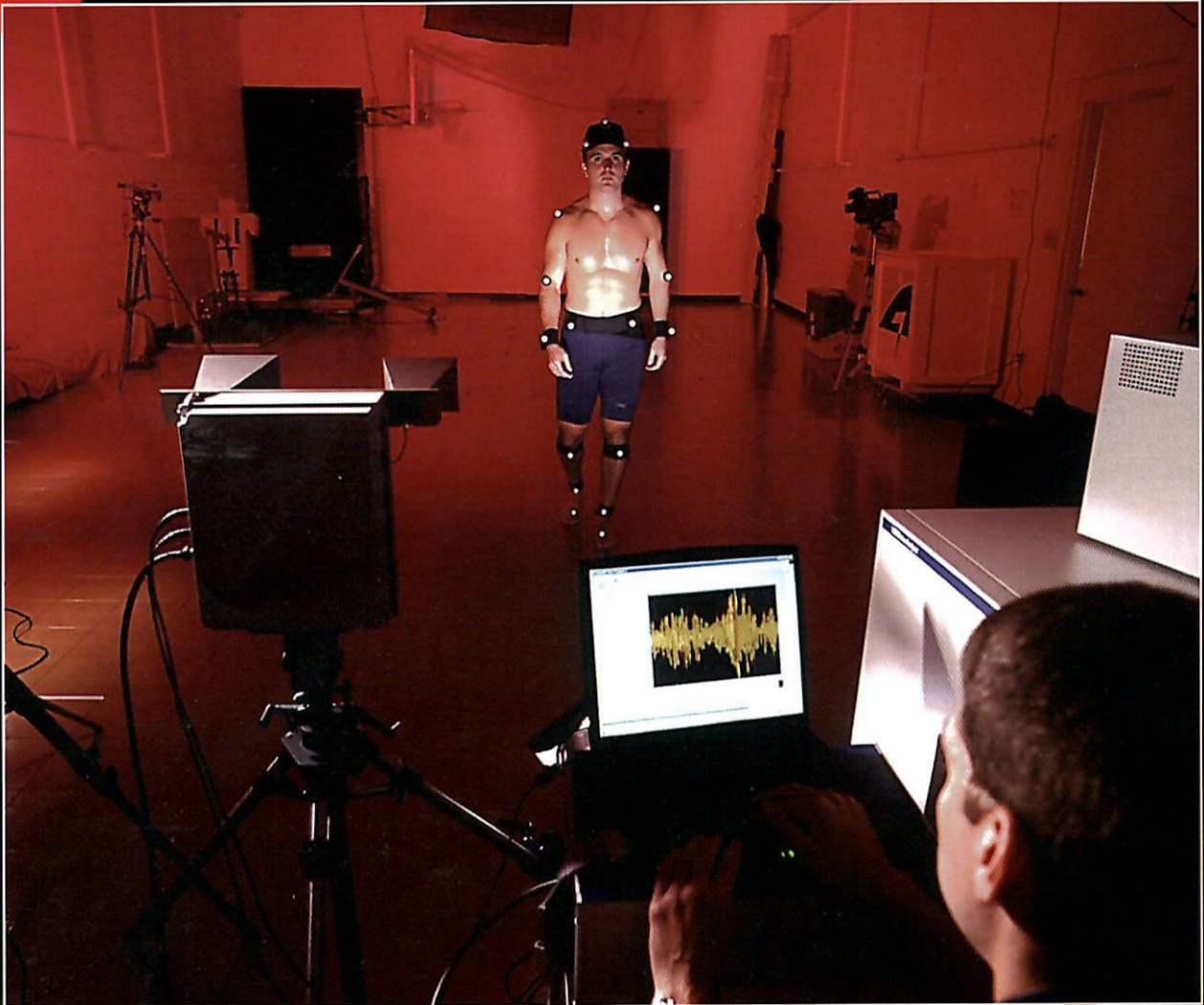
There have been many attempts to imitate the Israeli profiling system. Those security companies, such as ICTS, who were tasked by American air carriers to devise a profiling system suited to the American market, developed a system that was built on a combination of questioning based on the identification of suspicious signs in a passenger's passport, ticket, appearance or behaviour. The list was somewhat shorter than the Israeli version and the ability for the profilers to work in tandem with the national security agencies almost non-existent. Whilst the Israelis employed university students to carry out the passenger interviews, the European contract security companies were rarely able to attract employees with much in the way of academic qualifications.

Whilst the will was there to develop an intelligent security system, airline economics and the desire to avoid any possibility of upsetting travellers, especially frequent fliers and first and business class patrons, resulted in the American system being watered down. Such has been the extent of the dilution that many would find it hard to draw any comparison with the original system they bought into in the mid to late 1980s.

Profiling in the 21st Century means different things to different people. Consequently it is important to define which approach one is evaluating, for there is no such thing as 'The' profiling system.

Baggage profiling

For some, asking passengers about baggage constitutes profiling. The renowned 'Who packed your bags?' or 'Has anybody given you anything to



Until technologies, such as gait analysis, whereby passengers with bad intent can be identified by the way they walk, are proven effective, the only technology that can identify a wide range of different threats is the human brain.

take on the flight?' types of question are mistakenly believed by some to be designed to unmask the terrorist. They were actually introduced to help identify the duped passenger who is, unwittingly, carrying a device that could pose a threat.

I find it frightening that the asking of such questions has now become a 'ticking the box' exercise, rather than an effective security process. The questions are often printed on cards, where check-in agents simply ask passengers to read them. Or, they are asked by check-in agents whilst they are entering passengers' baggage and

seating information into computer terminals, without the requisite eye contact that is essential for the asking of any security questions. Or, given the move towards self-service check-in (or even online check-in), a computer gets to ask the question instead. In other words, a carefully considered security protocol has been watered down to the level where, in all honesty, airlines are simply covering their backsides!

Behavioural analysis

Whilst some governments feel comfortable profiling baggage, most

security professionals would agree that the essence of profiling lies in our ability to identify a passenger that is knowingly a threat to a flight. After all, we are supposed to feel confident that the billions spent on airport security technologies, such as metal detectors and X-ray systems, give us a reasonable chance of identifying threat objects in carry-on or checked baggage.

Profiling is supposed to help us where technology cannot. In other words, it is supposed to help us identify the potentially disruptive passenger under the influence of

alcohol, the individuals that plan an attack using their bare hands or legitimate clothing or carry-on items such as shoe laces, belts or duty free bottles, and the hijacker who manages to carry an undetectable weapon through a security checkpoint (being any non-metallic item if carried on the person, including explosives, given our failure to deploy available explosive detection portals, passenger X-ray or millimetric wave imaging systems in any abundance).

This necessitates us to be able to identify which passengers stand

every day a significant number of people are identified by customs officers carrying out illegal acts. If we can effect such security processes after passengers have flown in order to identify items that may be either illicit or for which duty is due (yet poses no threat to life), surely we could do the same before passengers board a flight and imperil the lives of their fellow travellers and, nowadays, those on the ground below?

Various companies have patented their own systems of behavioural analysis, yet they all encounter

Reid, interestingly enough, was identified as a potential threat to the flight through passenger profiling before he boarded.

If we cannot stop people who we believe, based on our gut feelings, pose a threat to a flight, then we have no security system at all. All we are left with is cosmetic security. And those who argue that such an approach is an infringement of our civil liberties, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), are denying the most important civil liberty of them all to every other passenger – the right to live.

“No technology currently available can identify the passenger that carries no officially recognised threatening object.”

out from the crowd. This means passengers that do not fit the norms of the travelling public on a given route and passengers who appear to be suffering undue stress.

In most cases we are able to identify the genuine reason for a person's trip simply by looking at them. Business travellers, package holidaymakers, specialist tour groups, backpackers and students all have a certain way of presenting themselves. The way each passenger dresses, behaves, interacts with others, and blends in to the airport environment tells us a lot about their intentions, without us even having to ask a single question.

Around the world, customs officers do this on a daily basis. Furthermore,

accusations of their solutions being prone to racial discrimination. Whatever the stereotypical image of a terrorist, we are not trying to identify all Arab passengers and brand them as potential threats. There are far too many non-Arab examples of people who have carried out large-scale terrorist acts, from the likes of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh through to the perpetrator of Tasmania's Port Arthur massacre, Martin Bryant, to justify such an approach even if political correctness was not an issue. Even within the aviation industry, in recent years we have had the likes of David Robinson and his attempt to carry out a suicidal hijacking of a Qantas aircraft in 2003 and Richard Reid, the shoe bomber, in 2001. Richard

I would love to see technology do the job for us, but it cannot. No technology currently available can identify the passenger that carries no officially recognised threatening object. No technology that is, save for the best technology of them all – the human brain.

Passenger questioning

Whilst behavioural analysis is probably the most effective screening system available today, if supplemented by questioning by a 'profiler' (or an 'interviewer' to use Transportation Security Administration terminology, which further reflects the way political correctness has become more important than security) one has the

opportunity to both specify the nature of the perceived threat and to identify other passengers who might post a threat, yet display no behavioural signs.

This is where airlines get really jumpy, as they fear upsetting the source of their revenue. Profilers (I will stick with that term) usually work off suspicious signs lists that have been compiled based on incidents that have happened in the past and have been contemplated as future terrorist scenarios.

The list of signs varies from country to country implementing the

Rarely is profiling a cause for delay to a flight, except when a passenger has arrived so late for a flight that they should actually have been denied boarding in any case. There is nothing more frustrating for a profiler than to have an airline check-in agent try and rush them to speed late arrivals through the profiling process when it is known that late arrivals warrant additional checks. The Chechen suicide bombers of last August's simultaneous attacks on flights departing Moscow were the last to board the flight.

Furthermore it is a wonderful way of responding to journalistic scoops. Whenever a reporter manages to demonstrate how they have managed to infiltrate a weapon onto an aircraft, we can always respond that our system is designed to identify people who actually pose a threat to a flight, which, presumably, the reporter did not.

Give me the choice between boarding an aircraft where no passengers have undergone any form of body or baggage search, but all have been profiled, and boarding a flight

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system and there is little doubt that the American legislators have given in to airline lobbying on Capitol Hill by abandoning many of the most important signs (for the sake of security, I am not going to define the signs in any detail in this article) and embracing a list of what they term as positive signs, the very existence of which demonstrates a failure to understand the essence of the profiling system.

Questioning need not mean interrogation. Taught correctly in most cases it need be nothing more than a casual chat about the passenger's intentions and previous travel history. It is only the awkward, uncooperative passenger that may engender a more seemingly hostile form of questioning.

Conclusion

Whilst we may prefer to trust the reassuring buzz of an archway metal detector or the clarity of images displayed on X-ray monitors, there have been too many 'I knew there was something wrong about him' stories to disregard profiling.

Whilst some members of the general public may decry the system, in the main it is blatantly the only common sense approach to security screening in existence. The obviously genuine passengers (through age, fame or demeanour) will be speedily processed from check-in to aircraft, allowing the more questionable passengers to be screened by physical and technologically-based means.

where 100% of baggage has been screened, but no form of behavioural analysis has been implemented, I will board the former any day. Why? Because it works and is based on what all effective security systems are built on – logic and common sense. AW

About the author

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