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PROTECTING AIRCRAFT:
long overshadowed by a focus on screening
by Philip Baum

"…terrorists opened fire on a Pakistan International Airlines aircraft as it came in to land from Riyadh…"

Aviation security, as a subject matter, is about analysing, and responding to, the broad range of threats which the industry faces with the aim of preventing acts of criminal interference taking place in the first place or, worst case scenario, enabling a response to incidents which limits the potential for loss of life or serious injury.

Given the extremely limited number of terrorist incidents which do occur, one could argue that the screening regime we all have to endure is disproportionate to the threat. After all, should two men with explosives in their shoes, or one failed plot utilising liquid explosives, result in millions of passengers around the world having to dispose of valuable perfumes and alcoholic beverages inadvertently carried or divest themselves of footwear before transiting the archway metal detector? Of course, the counter argument is that the measures we implement are mild inconveniences, ones better suffered than being blown out of the skies. After all, let's err on the side of caution…

However, it seems to me that what is disproportionate is the focus the industry places on examining passengers in comparison with the efforts expended on protecting aircraft at airports or in the skies.

Whilst incidents of suicidal terrorists boarding flights are, thankfully, a rarity, violations of airside security protocols are a regular occurrence. So rather than continually harping on about data privacy, explosive detection capability and checkpoint ergonomics, is it not time for the industry to re-focus its attention on how to ensure the integrity of aircraft in flight and the resilience of airport terminals to front-of-house attacks? Why, for example, do conference producers dedicate the bulk of their programmes to passenger, baggage and cargo screening and so little to airfield surveillance, the deployment of MANPADS countermeasures and perimeter intrusion detection?

Over the past two months we have witnessed a terrifying number of attacks perpetrated at airports and against aircraft in flight. In Karachi, 36 people were killed in a gun battle that raged for over five hours as suicidal members of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan attacked the international airport. Two weeks later, in Peshawar, terrorists opened fire on a Pakistan International Airlines aircraft as it came in to land from Riyadh – one woman was killed, and two other injured, as bullets penetrated the cabin. Meanwhile, in Libya, Tripoli's airport was converted into a battlefield; in a single

week 13 aircraft were destroyed or seriously damaged. In Israel, Hamas launched rockets from the Gaza Strip specifically targeting Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion International Airport and succeeded in bringing about the temporary suspension of many flights to the country. And Afghan airports in both Jalalabad and Kabul have also been the subject of militant activity.

Look at the above list and one could surmise that this is not a global issue, rather a Middle Eastern one where radical Islam is the cause. But, in the same period there have been significant attacks unconnected with religion. In La Paz, Bolivia, the actions of a psychologically disturbed individual resulted in 11 people being injured in a knife attack inside the passenger terminal. In the island paradise of Curaçao, criminal activity associated with rival drug gangs resulted in two people being killed and six injured outside the airport's arrival hall. In Xining's Caojiapu Airport, in the Chinese province of Qinghai, an improvised explosive device detonated in the public car park. And, of course, it would appear that pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine were behind the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 – a regional conflict suddenly became global headline news.

Meanwhile, in the last two months, stowaways have managed to clamber into the wheel wells of aircraft and later been found dead in The Netherlands, Kenya and Germany, further examples of porous perimeter security.

So, in terms of proportionality, I question whether we are truly investing enough energy, resources and manpower in protecting aviation from the very real threats occurring all around us? Does the checkpoint take centre stage because it is a media-friendly entity – accessible, one which we all recognise, experience, can associate with and can comment on – compared to the more obscure and 'boring' world of airport perimeter security?

We have a duty to protect ourselves. We need to examine more closely what a proportional response should really be. Focussing investment on screening alone is disproportionate to the threats we face. ■