



Daallo Airlines Bombing: Somalia-based al-Shabaab targets aviation

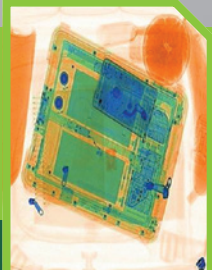
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DAALLO AIRLINES FLIGHT D3 159: BOMBED EN ROUTE TO DJIBOUTI

by Philip Baum

In August 2010, my lead editorial in this journal focused on the importance of learning from, and reacting to, aviation security-related incidents occurring in the developing world. "On 13th November 2009, the world paid scant attention to the arrest of a 35-year old Somali man, Abdi Hassan Abdi, who was the last passenger in line wishing to board a Daallo Airlines flight from Mogadishu to the northern Somali city of Hargeisa, with onward connections to Djibouti and Dubai. In his possession was a syringe with a green liquid inside, a plastic bag containing 600 grams of ammonium nitrate and half a litre of concentrated sulfuric acid in a plastic bottle; allegedly, when they were discovered at security screening (a notably impressive find in my view), the passenger then attempted to pay a bribe in order to be able to continue on his way. Although the African nation's authorities recognised that this was innovative, yet potentially effective way, of infiltrating an explosive device onto an aircraft, most of the rest of the world were either oblivious to the occurrence or readily dismissed it as being of little relevance to the global aviation industry." Six weeks after the Daallo Airlines incident of 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to destroy a Northwest flight en route from Amsterdam to Detroit using a similar device concealed in his underpants.

On 2 February 2016, a Daallo Airlines flight again departed Mogadishu, but this time an improvised explosive device had made it on board. The news coverage was broader, due to the global surge in the use of social media and the imagery that the semi-successful attack generated. In 2009, we relied on bland reports, as the attack had failed, whilst in 2016, we have photographs of an aircraft with a hole in its side – remarkably similar in nature to that of TWA flight 840 in 1986 – and startling video footage of the aircraft flying in the aftermath of the explosion. We also have CCTV footage which allegedly shows the moment that the 'bomber' was handed the laptop which supposedly contained the IED.

Few Western carriers operate to Somalia, and it would be easy to dismiss the latest incident as a regional issue, but to do so would be short-sighted. As I said back in 2010, "these are the very incidents that we ought to be focusing our attention on as they are the test sites, selected as they do not appear on our radar screens and specifically because we fail to appreciate their consequences."

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Initial reports indicate that the Daallo Airlines flight was not the intended target of the latest attack and that the passenger who carried the bomb on board, Abdullahi Abdissalam Borle, was ticketed to fly with Turkish Airlines. Inclement weather caused Turkish Airlines to cancel their flight to Mogadishu that day and they agreed with Daallo that they would transport their passengers as far as Djibouti where those with onward connections would be able to board another Turkish aircraft.

Time, possibly, will tell whether was Borle was a suicide bomber or a naïve individual who had been duped into carrying the laptop on board – perhaps believing he was smuggling drugs. If he was suicidal and had control over the time of detonation, he wasn't very good at his job as the A321 aircraft was only climbing through 11,000 ft at the time of the explosion. The blast was sufficient to cause a hole in the aircraft fuselage, from which Borle was sucked out, but, as with TW840 in 1986, the differential in cabin pressure at low altitude was insufficient to cause the aircraft to disintegrate.

The CCTV images which have been released show Borle receiving the laptop in question from two airport employees – also not the brightest of terrorists given that they allowed themselves to be caught on film – after he had passed through the security checkpoint. Once again, the spectre of the insider threat rears its ugly head.

As aforementioned, let's not be too quick to brush this aside with a 'what do you expect in Somalia' response. It is true that al-Shabaab, the likely orchestrators of the attack, have been waging a war against the Somali government and specifically targeting Turkish interests in the country on a regular basis, with the frequency of attacks being far greater than those perpetrated by other al-Qaeda affiliates in the Western world. However, as a result, security in Mogadishu is taken extremely seriously; we shouldn't forget that the 2009 attack was foiled due to the quality of the screening operation. In Amsterdam, we failed.

The lesson is less about the threat landscape – where Somalia is obviously in the crosshairs on a daily basis – and more about the general preparedness of individuals to obtain jobs in security restricted areas and utilise their security clearances to commit or facilitate terrorist atrocities. In the aftermath of Metrojet, Daallo Airlines and even Germanwings, every airport, airline and regulator needs to consider what steps it has taken to reduce its vulnerability to insider attacks.



We must also consider the resilience of our counterparts overseas and evaluate the steps they take to ensure that only adequately screened personnel have access to flights heading our way.

In the case of Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport, it would appear that this is an area of concern. The Daallo Airlines captain, Vlatko Vodopivec, was interviewed by the Associated Press and said, "The security is zero. When we park [the plane] there, some 20 to 30 people come to the tarmac." He claims that, "No one has a badge or those yellow vests. They enter and leave the plane, and no one knows who is who." If that is indeed the case, it begs the question why Daallo Airlines – the Dubai-based flag carrier of the Republic of Djibouti – is not providing its own security on the ground if their crew are so concerned about lax security airside, and why Hermes Airlines (who wet-leased the Airbus to Daallo) hasn't insisted on additional measures being put in place to protect their aircraft and crewmembers.

Whilst Somalia is no longer the lawless state it was, terrorist attacks are commonplace. Turkey has provided US \$400 million in aid to Somalia in recent years and is currently engaged in a huge programme to construct military training bases and provide training therein. For al-Shabaab, that makes the overseas investor a legitimate target. Indeed, on 5 January this year, gunmen attacked a compound housing Turkish nationals near the airport, resulting in one person being killed and another injured. And, on 21 January,

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26 people were killed after suicidal al-Shabaab militants stormed Mogadishu's Beach View Hotel and Café, along with the Lido Seafood Restaurant.

One day before the bombing of the Daallo Airlines flight, Somalia's federal government ordered all airlines operating the route between Mogadishu and Hargeisa (being the route targeted in the 2009 attempted bombing) to halt their operations there. This was the result of tension between Somalia's central government and the breakaway region of Somaliland, where Hargeisa is located. The government cited security concerns. Whether the Daallo bombing was related to Somaliland or not, their concerns became realised and the industry had a lucky escape.

For the global community, let's take note and avoid complacency. Delivering effective security services is much easier when one faces daily attacks and the stakeholders buy into the security regime and its associated processes as they sense their own vulnerability. We failed to heed the lesson of the previous Daallo Airlines incident. Perhaps this time we'll embrace the challenge and view the 2016 incident as being as relevant to us all as that of Metrojet or Germanwings. ■

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