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Volcanoes & Flotillas: from Eyjafjallajökull to Gaza

by Philip Baum

As we pat down bodies, X-ray bags, verify identification, effect random vehicle searches and swab a variety of hand-held items that might just have come into contact with explosives, we believe that we are doing all that we can to prevent the next terrorist atrocity taking place. Laudable efforts, implemented by underpaid individuals in one of the most bureaucratic of labour environments.

Most of us willingly accept these checks as a necessary evil, going through the motions of divesting our shoes and belts at checkpoints, disposing our liquid purchases into huge bins, standing patiently in line after line and handing over our papers umpteen times for any single journey. And so we should.

Predicting the modus operandi of the next terrorist attack is no easy task and a lack of evidence makes airlines and airports reluctant to embrace fresh procedures and technologies designed to be proactive. As such, there is little to prevent a chemical, biological or radiological attack.

There have been a number of events recently that have demonstrated the impact of being ill prepared. The eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland, which paralysed the European aviation industry for a week in April, not only showed us the force of Mother Nature, but also the need to plan for the unpredictable. There has been significant reporting of the fact that Eyjafjallajökull is actually the small volcano and that its far more powerful sister, Katla, has a habit of erupting within a year of Eyjafjallajökull. It could well be that the skies of Europe will have to close yet again and, perhaps, for even longer next time around.

Rather than simply accepting the closure, senior management should now be planning how it will use the time constructively. We always complain about a lack of training time and rarely are full-scale security exercises conducted due to

the 24/7 nature of normal airport life. It would be scandalous to simply pay staff to sit around and twiddle their thumbs when an opportunity to enhance both frontline and management capability is afforded us.

In terms of volcanic activity, there is little point commencing the planning once the eruption has taken place. Now is the time for the contingency plans to be drafted; plans that not only address managing safety and security, but also how to best occupy manpower. An airport is not like a school that gets closed down due to heavy snow and whose children can enjoy the special treat of a snow day to go and play.

“...Katla has a habit of erupting within a year of Eyjafjallajökull...”

The Israeli raid on the flotilla making its way towards Gaza on 31st May, and the subsequent deaths of nine persons on board, also demonstrated just how critical it is to have the correct intelligence and the price one pays if one gets it wrong. Here was one of the world's elite commando forces, carrying out a mission carrying a heavy price tag – a damned if you do and damned if you don't operation. They couldn't risk allowing the flotilla to reach Gazan shores uninspected, the ramifications of which could have been disastrous, yet any intervention, especially in international waters, was going to engender worldwide condemnation.

The comparison with our aviation security process is clear. The vast majority of passengers boarding airliners are law abiding citizens who mean no harm and who simply want to travel as quickly as possible from the point of departure to their desired destination. Sure there are a few who make life difficult for themselves, and for others, by having a few drinks too

many at the bar before their flight or who are naturally objectionable individuals who like to challenge authority. But, the number of genuinely threatening passengers is very small. Because of them, however, we all submit ourselves to scrutiny.

The same applies to demonstrators. The vast majority have worthy goals and commendable desires. In the case of the May flotilla, most passengers on the ships, wanted to see humanitarian aid brought into Gaza. A few of them were making the journey as it was the trendy thing to do, probably ignorant of the potential for the flotilla to be used for more nefarious purposes. But, amongst their number, were some hardliners, prepared to resist the ships being inspected at all costs.

The raid itself was deemed to be a failure both in terms of the execution of the exercise – dropping in soldiers one-by-one into a savage crowd of people who were far from being peaceful activists on a humanitarian mission – and as a PR exercise. Israel, within hours, was being vilified around the world.

Much of the criticism was justified and the Israeli public was also expressing its dismay, with serious questions being asked of the military and Defence Minister Ehud Barak as to why and how they so misjudged the resistance they would encounter. Yet, counter-terrorism is not for the faint-hearted. Hamas, albeit the elected government in Gaza, is regarded as a terrorist organisation, one that refuses to recognise the existence of its neighbour and has sanctioned the launching of rockets into Israel.

Whatever one thinks about the blockade, activists have to understand that it's all very well being on some sort of moral crusade, but that demonstrating in the comparative safety of London's Whitehall, Paris' Champs Elysees, or outside the White House is a different ball game to sailing into a war zone with all its inherent risks.

With local populations jittery because their lives and very way of life depend upon the security infrastructure, it's a case of "if you mess with fire, you're going to get burned".

The media bears a huge responsibility for stoking that fire and the way in which the internet can now be used to incite riots and demonstrations around the globe within hours of any incident taking place is frightening. Often the masses are on the streets protesting before even the most basic facts have been established.

When it comes to the Middle East, there is certainly disproportionate news coverage. The situation in Darfur, Zimbabwe or Tibet is given scant coverage in comparison. And there have been few demonstrators prepared to march, on site, against the actions of the Sudanese, Zimbabwean or Chinese military. Perhaps, in Israel's case, it is because we expect better from a democracy with its own history of suffering.

Yet this is war. As Colonel Richard Kemp, former head of the British forces in Afghanistan, pointed out in a recent interview, "Look at what appears

to have been a very serious military error made by the German army in Northern Afghanistan last year when something like 50-150 civilians were killed in an air strike." How much international condemnation? How many demonstrations in the world's capital cities? Not a lot and precious few.

None of this justifies Israeli excesses, which the Israeli government needs to investigate and be transparent about. However, the problem with security is that, however much we wish it was otherwise, the actions of the few spoil it for the majority. We require rigorous measures in order to safeguard our way of life from those whose agenda is extremist in nature.

There is a reason why El Al has not been successfully attacked since 1968; their response, however unpalatable for many, is based on common sense and an acceptance of the reality of the world we live in. It is also true that, if you have nothing to hide, then you have nothing to fear. That's why I begrudgingly accept the need for a host of unnecessary measure at airports – I have nothing to hide.

"...the number of genuinely threatening passengers is very small. Because of them, however, we all submit ourselves to scrutiny..."

True, I wish that some of those measures were replaced with a modicum of common sense and I dream of the day when the global aviation industry comes to its senses and ceases its capitulation to the ridiculous claims that "it's not fair" to differentiate. Terrorism is not fair. The use of humanitarian vessels by groups linked with al Qaeda is not fair. Poverty, suffering and occupation are not fair. Life's not always fair...but we have to make it as secure as we can so that we can enjoy the freedoms we are afforded. The industry and those who regulate it must start to open their eyes (and web browsers) to the reality of the world we live in...

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