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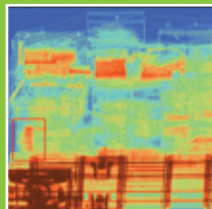
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INSIDERS AND FRONT-OF-HOUSE SHOOTERS:

by Philip Baum

Andrew Parker, Head of Britain's MI5, recently stated in a speech to the Royal United Services Institute that, "We have seen the threat shift more to increasing numbers of smaller-scale attacks and a growing proportion of groups and individuals taking it upon themselves to commit acts of terrorism."

His comments were made in the aftermath of the Edward Snowden 'affair' in which the former contractor for the US' National Security Agency opted to disclose classified documents to The Guardian newspaper in the UK which, to the horror of those in the security services, the paper irresponsibly, in my view, opted to publish. Whilst the decision to print the exposé was justified by the paper's management on the basis that they felt the general public had a right to know how their personal data was being utilised – the security agencies were reported to have direct access to the numerous computer systems, including those at Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Skype, Yahoo and YouTube – it had also, according to Parker, handed "the advantage to the terrorists."

The consequences of The Guardian's actions in making Snowden's disclosures public are terrifying in themselves, let alone the terrorist attacks that might be wrought as a result. If sophisticated terrorist plots are less likely to be developed and orchestrated over the internet, and those engaged in terrorism opt not to use email and social media to facilitate communication, there are three primary areas of concern for those engaged in protecting civil aviation.

Firstly, the ability, as conceded by Parker, for the security services to monitor the activities of individuals suspected of being radicalised is reduced. As a result, specific actions, such as the 2006 liquid explosive plot, have a greater chance of remaining under the radar and, therefore, of succeeding. "GCHQ intelligence has played a vital role in stopping many of the terrorist plots that MI5 and the police have tackled in the past decade," said Parker, and, such intel, has certainly been more effective in thwarting attacks against aviation than airport security processes. In the UK, between 11 September 2001 and March 2013, a disturbing 330 people were convicted of terrorism-related offences, 121 of whom were (in March) in prison, nearly three-quarters of whom were British.

Secondly, the use of passenger data to determine the degree of risk any individual might pose will naturally become less reliable if the quantity and quality of useful data available to the security agencies is compromised.

Last, but not least, if those with terroristic intent are less likely to utilise the internet to transmit sensitive information or to make purchases of goods which might be used in an attack, then the sophistication of the plots will diminish and the potential for lone wolves or splinter groups to formulate far more simplistic attacks increases. As a result, whilst we are ramping up the deployment of advanced screening technologies to detect a broader range of threat substances, those who are prepared to die for their cause are conjuring up plots which do not even require infiltration of complex improvised explosive devices (IEDs) through the checkpoint.

To a certain extent, that may make non-aviation targets more attractive. This year we have witnessed a number of such attacks – at the Boston Marathon, in the streets of Woolwich in south

it's not all about checkpoint operations

London, inside the Navy Yard in Washington DC and, most recently, in a shopping mall in Nairobi. But this should not be a reason for complacency within the aviation industry. Firstly, as aforementioned, we should be ever more vigilant if the ability of the intelligence services is reduced and, secondly, as demonstrated by the Washington and Nairobi incidents, the potential to cause havoc and guarantee success (if one is prepared to die) is far more achievable if an attack completely bypasses security screening processes.

We talk about the insider threat, but many entities have yet to develop any concrete programmes to address the vulnerability. Some argue that it's too difficult a challenge. The attack on the Navy Yard in Washington DC on 16 September 2013 illustrated the risk of low level screening of 'insiders', that not all assailants are Islamic fundamentalists, and that the threat is not limited to terrorism, but that the impact of an attack can be as catastrophic.

"...those who are prepared to die for their cause are conjuring up plots which do not even require infiltration of complex improvised explosive devices ..."

Aaron Alexis was a 34-year-old IT subcontractor with an entry pass to the Navy Yard complex. Having served as a full-time reservist in the Navy from 2007 until 2011 (petty officer 3rd class at the time of his discharge), and recipient of a National Defense Service Medal and a Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, he would have made many people's 'trusted' lists. However, this recent convert to Buddhism was also suffering mental health issues and believed that he was being controlled by extremely low frequency (ELF) radio waves.

The attack against the Westgate Shopping Centre in Nairobi on 21 September 2013 demonstrated both the global reach of terrorism and the vulnerability of many public concourses – airport terminals among them – to mass shootings. The three day attack, allegedly perpetrated by members of al-Shabaab, resulted in the death of 67 innocent individuals who just happened to be caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Many people within the aviation industry have long feared a 'Mumbai-style' front-of-house attack but, again, how many airports have increased their resiliency?

Aviation security needs to be more all-encompassing than before and our countermeasures must take on a greater degree of unpredictability. After all, if Parker is correct in judging that, "I do not believe the terrorist threat is worse now than before. But it is more diffuse. More complicated. More unpredictable," then our response must be likewise. ■

