

Timothy Compston explains why the vetting of those that work at today's airports is high on the aviation security agenda

AIRPORT SECURITY – COMBATING THE INSIDER THREAT

What happened at Brussels Zaventem International Airport – two suicide bomb blasts in the departures hall of the main terminal, resulting in 11 deaths and 81 individuals injured – has certainly served as a wake-up call for those responsible for airport security here in Western Europe. Unsurprisingly, post-Brussels, there has been much soul searching by the authorities, and airport operators, regarding the steps that they can, conceivably, take to bridge any security gaps. The vetting of those employed at airports is one aspect of security that has been raised by many commentators as a potential weak link, especially as any lapses may allow terrorist cells to infiltrate this critical national infrastructure with devastating effect.

Looking more closely at the human dimension associated with the Brussels tragedy, Flemish-language television station VTM revealed, recently, that one of the suicide bombers – Najim Laachraoui – had actually worked at the airport for five years until 2012. Of course, those who say that this should have raised a red flag are working with the benefit of hindsight. It was, in fact, only two years on in February 2014 that Laachraoui is thought to have actually travelled to Syria, long after his stint at the airport, so whether the warning signs were there for his employer – or the authorities – to take action prior to this is still open to question. Added to a direct, albeit historical, connection with one of those involved in the Brussels airport attack, an open letter from airport police officers issued the week after the attack also raises serious questions about how deep seated such vulnerabilities are. One of the key points flagged up by the letter was that, according to the police officers: “at least 50 ISIS sympathisers are working in the airport” with security passes in roles ranging from shop assistants to cleaners and baggage handlers.

Although not specifically aviation connected, the multiple events in Paris which predated Brussels also had wider ramifications for airport security thinking. A case in point was the fast-track review of security at key locations in and around the French capital that saw Charles de Gaulle airport – Europe's second largest – coming into the frame for tougher employee vetting measures. As part of the security effort at Charles de Gaulle, lockers were searched

for materials, which could hint at radicalisation or terrorist connections, and a wide-ranging review was instigated of the 87,000 individuals holding badges giving them access to security-critical areas like baggage handling and airside.

On the other side of the Atlantic a report



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published last June by the Homeland Security Department's Office of Inspector General unsurprisingly garnered many media headlines against the backdrop of the growing terrorist threat. The primary reason that the document gained so much traction was the fact that it contained the findings of a review to: "identify enhancements to the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) vetting of workers to secure areas of commercial airports for links to terrorism, criminal history and lawful status". Although the report started by acknowledging that: "TSA's multi-layered process to vet aviation workers with potential links to terrorism was generally effective", it did highlight some areas of concern following the audit. One aspect that the media was quick to pick up on was the fact that testing showed that 73 individuals with terrorism-related category codes were not identified by TSA. The reason for this lapse was put down by

Some people that work at airports can fly under the radar of security checks if they don't have a criminal record

the report's authors to the fact that: "TSA is not authorised to receive all terrorism-related information under current interagency watch-listing policy".

Coming to the defence of the Transport Security Administration (TSA) in a later piece for *USA Today* – following what he saw as "inaccurate accounts" in several news media reports on how TSA assesses aviation security at US airports – TSA administrator Peter Neffenger sought to put the record straight: "TSA has long recognised the importance of vetting airport workers and flight crews, among others" he stated. He went on to address head on the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General report and, crucially, to try to dispel any concerns regarding the much-reported findings on the 73 workers: "After review, in collaboration with the FBI, TSA determined that none of the vetted individuals met the standards for watch listing and are not known or suspected terrorists". Neffenger went on to offer the reassurance that: "Using the Government's Terrorist Screening Database, TSA continuously vets individuals from their initial airport application throughout the time they have airport access".

Moving to the other side of the world, when it comes to the exact cause of the downing of the A321 Russian airliner over Sinai, which led to the deaths of 224 passengers and crew, after much conjecture, by mid-November the chief of Russia's security services (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov confirmed that traces of explosives had been found in the plane's debris. He suggested that a bomb, of up to 1kg of TNT, had been put on board causing the plane to break apart in mid-air. Although the exact methodology for the explosive being smuggled onto the Metrojet flight is still unconfirmed, renewed attention is now being given to the way that passengers' baggage is screened, the training and effectiveness of security staff and, crucially, the screening and vetting of those who work airside and could, potentially, gain access to a plane.

Adding to concerns about the situation on the ground, shortly after the incident a number of security officials involved at Sharm El-Sheikh Airport in Sinai, Egypt, spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press (AP). They were keen to raise a number of concerns including about a malfunctioning scanner and, worryingly, bribes being taken by policemen monitoring X-ray machines. One official's words were particularly damning in this regard: "I can't tell you how many times I have caught a bag full of drugs or weapons that they have let through for 10 euros or whatever."

Turning to Martin Aggar, who is business development director for aviation across Europe at G4S - and previously was involved with a major contract at Baghdad International Airport, when discussing Sinai, he thinks that the indications point to 'interference': "This is someone placing an explosive device on the aircraft either in the baggage area or in the passengers' luggage".



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Concerns about baggage handlers has led to some airlines installing hidden cameras

Moving on to vetting, Aggar remarks that there is a requirement with the UK, and certainly Europe, that all staff are “fairly heavily vetted” with criminal record checks and letters from employers, among other things: “Whether that process is fully followed in somewhere like Sharm El-Sheikh I would seriously question,” he concludes.

Talking about the challenges of vetting staff in other countries where access to records may be more problematic, Aggar reflects on his experience at Baghdad International Airport in the early days: “The infrastructure, the whole process around records and everything, was so disjointed. Mainly as a result of the war it was very difficult to vet a member of staff working at Baghdad airport. If you had a handling agent in the baggage hall he had probably gone through a vetting process, but there was the question of how good that process was because the intelligence within that community was not as good as somewhere like the UK, France or Germany”.

So what was the solution? In terms of Baghdad, Aggar says that one of the key things G4S did was to link in to the Iraqi Government who were slowly improving, under recommendations from the US: “The US had ‘wanted people’ lists, they had a reasonable record of people who they had come across, so it was a matter of getting clearance from the US Government when we [G4S] first started the contract”. Aggar goes on to say that now it is about clearing people through a criminal records check – similar to that in the UK – with the Iraqi Government. In addition, he explains, that in his experience it helps to go one step further and tap into wider local intelligence by speaking to family members and community elders.

Of course, it is not just airport workers who may have terrorist connections that can prove detrimental to airport operations, those with a criminal intent are also proving to be a major headache in their own right. With regards to baggage handling,

for instance, some airlines have even resorted to installing covert cameras in an aircraft’s hold to catch unscrupulous individuals in the act of stealing items from passengers’ luggage when they think they are out of sight. A case in point is El Al airlines, which was concerned about thefts at JFK in New York. Back in 2013 it set up a camera in a baggage hold, which picked up baggage handlers stealing a \$5,000 watch and other valuable items and cash. Sadly, these are not isolated incidents as over the border in Canada earlier this year, three baggage handlers were charged with thefts from luggage at Halifax Stanfield International airport.

There are also worries that if left unchecked lower level criminal behaviour can lead on to other activity and even terrorism. This was certainly something that was voiced by Patrick Gannon, police chief of Los Angeles International Airport, following the firing of 16 airport workers last year on the back of an investigation that uncovered a large stash of valuables, from computers to designer bags: “We cut theft in the two terminals by 60 percent because of aggressive investigative work,” said Gannon, “I absolutely think that if we don’t pay attention to the small things that happen around here it could lead to much larger things. So there is, I believe, a connection between baggage theft and terrorism,” he concluded.

In the end, it is certainly no easy task for airports seeking to weed out those individuals who may be a real security threat, especially as some may fly under the radar by virtue of not having a criminal record or because they are radicalised in a relatively short period of time once they have taken up a position. Given these dynamics it is imperative that, moving forward, airports have an active process in place which doesn’t simply stop when someone starts working, but takes account of changes in their circumstances – with the help of the relevant authorities – throughout their period of employment.

Timothy Compston is a journalist and PR professional who specialises in security issues. He studied International Relations and Strategic Studies at Lancaster University, is PR director at Compston PR and a previous chairman of both the National PR Committee and CCTV PR Committee of the British Security Industry Association (BSIA).