

AIRPORT SECURITY

Mark Brace examines the growing difficulties of keeping tourists safe in airports

On 19 December 2019, the first flight in over four years from the United Kingdom to Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt – previously an extremely popular destination for British holidaymakers – landed at the resort's airport. Flights had been suspended following the crash of a Russian airliner on 31 October 2015 shortly after taking off from Sharm El-Sheikh, killing all 224 on board – mostly tourists from Russia. The cause of the crash was an improvised explosive device (IED) detonating in the aircraft's hold, likely placed there by an insider at the airport before the flight departed.

What persuaded the UK authorities to change their minds? What has changed at Sharm El-Sheikh and in the aviation industry more widely since then? In announcing the decision, the UK's Department for Transport (DfT) cited improvements in security procedures at the airport following close cooperation between aviation officials in both countries as being behind the lifting of the ban; these comments were mirrored by the Egyptian Ministry of Civil Aviation. The go-ahead followed years of audits, inspections and working with the Egyptian authorities to ensure the security and safety of aircraft, passengers and crew to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. The UK was not alone in stopping flights – in the aftermath of the 2015 attack most European and Russian carriers stopped services to Sharm El-Sheikh or Egypt as a whole, and the US imposed a ban on cargo on direct flights from Egypt to the US, citing concerns over airport security. Continuing efforts by Governments to mitigate the threat from concealed IEDs being used on board aircraft, and ongoing security audits by state bodies – including the DfT and the US Transportation Security Administration – have led to the resumption of flights in most cases. Throughout this period, the Egyptian government has repeatedly highlighted the significant improvements made to aviation security at Sharm El-Sheikh airport.

However, some security concerns remain in the country – in July 2019, for example, British Airways suspended flights at Cairo International Airport for five days for unspecified security reasons. Of key importance for the suffering Egyptian tourist industry, Russia remains the most notable absentee, having previously accounted for the highest number of foreign tourists at the country's Red Sea resorts. The Russian authorities were expected to allow the resumption of charter flights to Egyptian resort airports in November 2019 (they gave the green light to

flights to Cairo earlier in 2019), but this was postponed, citing inadequate security improvements. Efforts remain ongoing – most recently, in late January a Russian security delegation made positive noises about the improvements at Hurgada's airport, noting the newly installed computed tomography (CT) x-ray equipment.

The October 2015 attack was claimed by Islamic State-Sinai Province (IS-SP), the local branch of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist organisation. The threat from extremist groups continues in Egypt, particularly from IS-SP. After the resumption of flights to Sharm El-Sheikh, the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office maintained its existing advice that there remains "a heightened risk of terrorism against aviation" in Egypt and that "additional security measures are in place for flights departing from Egypt to the UK". While these additional measures were not specified, it highlights the need not

STANDARDS NEED TO BE RAISED TO TACKLE WEAK POINTS IN THE AVIATION SECURITY NETWORK

only for up-to-date equipment, but to maintain high levels of security.

In 2017, the United Nations aviation body, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), launched its Global Aviation Security Plan (GASeP). Noting that "security is a critical pillar for the growth and sustainability of the global aviation industry", it provided a blueprint for security practitioners in the aviation sphere. The GASeP highlighted IEDs as the weapon of choice to target aviation – both aircraft and airports – emphasising the crucial role played by effective screening regimes, both for detection and as a deterrent. The question of whether the deterrent effect of security screening has been eroded is frequently raised; however, it still has a vital part to play. It may even have contributed to the failure of one of the more recent attack plots – the July 2017 plan to target an Etihad flight from Sydney to Abu Dhabi. This was apparently thwarted primarily by luck, as the authorities were not alerted until after the attack was meant to have taken place. The perpetrators transported their IED, concealed in a meat grinder packed in cabin baggage, to the airport but took it back home after being informed it was too heavy. It remains unknown whether the IED would have



Security officers monitor a scanner at the Rafah border crossing between Palestine and Egypt

been detected by screening, but the fact that it might have been exposed to higher scrutiny due to being too heavy may have contributed to the decision to abort the attack.

The Sydney attack plot also served to remind the industry that large-scale attacks against aviation are not limited to locations with significant problems with violent non-state actors, such as terrorist groups or insurgents, like Egypt. The 2016 attacks targeting Brussels and Istanbul Atatürk airports using IEDs and assault weapons also illustrate this, although Turkey has admittedly endured significant issues with Kurdish separatists and lived with IS on its doorstep for a number of years. Both of those incidents reignited the airside/landside/kerbside debate over where security checks begin at airports and what shape they should take to protect perceived 'soft targets' such as crowded places. In Brussels, the perpetrators exploited the unfettered access to the landside departures area to detonate their IEDs, whereas in Istanbul the

firearms and suicide vest attack commenced against the security cordon at the terminal entrance before proceeding into the landside area. ICAO's GASeP also seeks to tackle this problem, stating that: "Attacks on the landside areas of airports have highlighted a growing threat to locations where members of the public and passengers circulate with minimal restrictions and congregate at predictable times."

The focus of this article is on the airport. It is not intended to take into account resort security, which is obviously a key factor in keeping tourists safe, particularly in parts of the world more susceptible to terrorist threats or in less stable countries. However – literally and figuratively – the airport experience starts at the resort. Security threats can be introduced into the system as soon as those bags are loaded onto the coach as holidaymakers depart. As well as effective screening of passenger baggage, the vetting of external

service providers and staff is important. Airport security officials also need to have an understanding of the threats that can impact airport access for staff and passengers alike. Ground transport and airport access roads can be targeted for attack: in the immediate aftermath of the coordinated suicide bombings against churches and hotels in Sri Lanka last April, an IED was found on a road leading to Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport. While it is unclear what the perpetrators intended, it had the potential to target a busload of tourists evacuating to the airport. Airport roads can also be targeted for intentional disruption – passengers cannot be expected to run the gauntlet of social unrest, whether it's a gathering for a returning

THE US IMPOSED A BAN ON CARGO ON FLIGHTS FROM EGYPT, CITING SECURITY CONCERNS

opposition politician, striking airport workers or climate activists gluing themselves to the road. While the introduction of new and more effective technology such as CT equipment is critical to addressing gaps and maintaining the advantage over those with nefarious intent, it is important to ensure standards are raised globally to tackle any potential weak points in the aviation security network. Not only that, but standards have to be effectively implemented by trained and motivated staff using modern equipment – and applied equally to passengers and airport staff in order to mitigate the insider threat as far as is

practicable. This should begin with fostering a healthy and constructive security culture and implementing a robust personnel security regime; developing it further by forming strong links with police, security forces and regulators; and monitoring progress against milestones by using a Security Management System (SeMS).

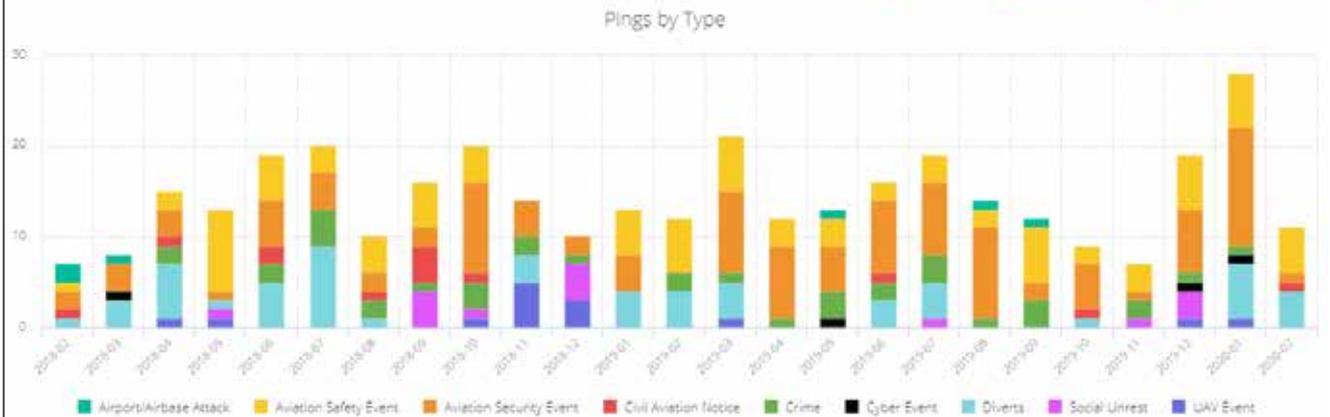
NO COUNTRY LEFT BEHIND

ICAO highlights this need to move forward together in the GAsEP with its “no country left behind” principle. This should mean international cooperation and removing barriers to the effective sharing of aviation security information in the public and private sectors. Returning to the Sharm El-Sheikh issue, there have been allegations from some quarters that there may be political reasons for Russia delaying the return of holiday charter flights to bring the tourists back. Indeed, similar accusations were levelled at the UK authorities during the four-year hiatus in services to Sharm El-Sheikh; after all, UK operators were still permitted to fly to other airports in Egypt, including those serving the Red Sea resorts of Hurghada and Marsa Alam. While this is not the medium in which to discuss political and diplomatic disagreements, these in themselves can impact aviation security by preventing the sharing of information crucial to the efficient and effective implementation of global standards.

All of this highlights the need for a holistic, futureproof approach to airport security, fostering innovation and sharing information to safeguard travellers and by extension the financial future of the industry. While governments have successfully thwarted plots targeting aviation in recent years, hopefully we won't have to wait for the next attack to find out whether the current approach is truly fit for purpose ●

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Governments across the globe need to share security information in the interests of public safety



Picture credit: Osprey