

**COMMENTARY**

**Inadequate Security Measures at International  
Airports in Face of the Terrorist Threat Level  
A Call for Effective Standardization**

**By**

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## General Background

Terrorist attacks that have taken place in recent years in the Middle East, Africa and Europe have brought to light the fact that the threat against civil aviation is persistent, and is not limited to terror prone areas only. As part of the development of methods and techniques of the terrorist organizations, we are witnessing the constant exploitation of the limitations of today's common security measures, especially in regard to passengers' and hand luggage inspection, detection of homemade explosive materials concealed in baggage, detection of explosive devices in air cargo, and coping with an 'insider' threat.

A long line of aviation terror attacks in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, in which security systems have been penetrated, lead to a bleak conclusion – in all instances in which terrorists tried to penetrate the prevailing security systems in airports where international standards were implemented, they were successful. This began a short time after September 11 attacks with the concealment of explosive material in shoes (December, 2001 – Paris), in underwear (December 2009 – Amsterdam) and in air cargo (October, 2010 – Sana'a, Dubai, Bonn, Doha).

The recent terrorist attacks on the Russian Airbus that departed from Egypt (Sharm-el-Sheikh), to Russia (Saint Petersburg), the DAALLO Airlines Flight 159 that departed from Somalia Mogadishu) to Djibouti , and the Egypt Air flight from Paris to Cairo (attacks that were seemingly carried out by smuggling explosives onto the planes), illustrate the above (aviation security vulnerabilities and loopholes) and constitute a turning point escalation in the threat level posed to commercial civil aviation users.

Terrorist organizations in general, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in particular that suffered defeats in Iraq and Syria, are increasingly motivated to carry out high profile attacks of mass killings. Civil aviation undoubtedly constitutes a prime target.

Furthermore, the rise in the number of terrorist attacks carried out by “homegrown” terrorists, residents and citizens of western countries, utilizing the skills and training that have been acquired in Iraq and Syria, coupled with their accessibility and

familiarity with local aviation targets, presents an unprecedented level of threat.

In summary, we are living in a period in which the motivation and ability to carry out terrorist attacks against civil aviation is increasing, while the common security measures are lagging behind.

### **The Current Problematic Situation**

Despite the on-going escalation in the level and severity of the threats, the customary security measures and screening methods at airports in most countries (except for the US, Israel and very few other countries) are lagging behind the threats by generations.

As to the existing international regulations, not only it does not contribute to narrowing the gap between the threat and the response, but it is one of the main reasons for the widening of the gap. The only binding global regulation today is Annex 17 of the Chicago Convention of ICAO, to which every revision requires the consent of all 191 member states and several affiliated organizations. Moreover, every amendment, even the smallest and most agreed upon, takes at least two years. The result is that even though Annex 17 is the only binding document on the international level, it is formulated in a very general manner, which allows for even the most superficial security measures to comply with its criteria. The result is that the security measures and methods implemented today in most airports do not provide an effective solution to most of the actual threats facing aviation, including threats from the 1980s.

Even the European Union legislation (which is binding only to its 28 members states), despite being slightly more specific and binding than Annex 17, suffers from a similar problem. Every revision to the legislation requires the agreement of all member states, including countries that are not considered to be under the threat of terrorism. Some of those countries may give priority to economic and operational considerations, rather than adopting more effective security measures in response to the threat.

Currently, there is no actual international standard that clearly defines the minimum

effective (security) measures required to be implemented by each international airport, in order to deal optimally with the range of threats.

One result of the international regulation situation that is evident to every passenger, not to mention to terrorists gathering intelligence before a mission, is passenger and hand luggage security checks. It appears that in most of the world's airports, passenger and hand luggage checks are still based on a body search using a metal detecting device and the screening of the hand luggage, with no automatic capability of explosives detection.

While these search methods are effective in detecting metal-made weapons, they have no relevance in detecting explosive devices and explosive material on the passenger's body, as well as non-metallic weapons. Their effectiveness in detecting the kind of explosive device currently used by terrorist organizations in aviation attacks is minute or non-existent.

### **Supervision of Security Arrangements at Airports and Airlines**

International regulation requires states to conduct audits and supervision of security arrangements at airports and airlines. This activity is currently carried out by auditors who operate at the inspection site and issue reports in which they describe their impressions regarding the degree of compliance with security measures according to the international requirements – requirements that are known to be far from appropriate in addressing the current threats.

In addition, the inspections are not carried out according to a structured and quantitative objective criterion and, as a result, different auditors may arrive at different conclusions about a certain airport with regard to the level of effectiveness and quality of its security arrangements.

Since, as mentioned above, the international regulation cannot serve as an index for evaluating security effectiveness at airports and airlines, there is a need for the

development of effective security indexes and a methodology for using them, with methods of audit and review, for the purpose of evaluating the level of security effectiveness in airports and airlines around the world.

In a discussion that was held on June 12, 2017 at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Centre (IDC) Herzliya, Prof. Boaz Ganor, Executive Director of the ICT, postulated that it is necessary to formulate and distribute an international standard, to be formed by the ICT - a standard that will define the required security activities for international airports around the world, in order to strengthen their ability to withstand terrorism threats and will raise the security level for the aviation industry worldwide.

## **Summary**

The fact that currently there is no drastic action being taken to change the existing legislative situation in the aviation industry, in order to increase the ability to deal with potential terrorists, is liable to encourage acts of aggression against the industry.

Since no effective local and international legislation is on the horizon to improve the existing situation, it is necessary to formulate such an international standard that will define the required security measures and activities for international airports around the world. This standard, and its transparency vis-à-vis the population that make use of it, is expected to strengthen the airports ability to withstand terrorism threats, thus raising the level of security for the aviation industry worldwide.

## ABOUT THE ICT

Founded in 1996, the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is one of the leading academic institutes for counter-terrorism in the world, facilitating international cooperation in the global struggle against terrorism. ICT is an independent think tank providing expertise in terrorism, counter-terrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability and risk assessment, intelligence analysis and national security and defense policy. ICT is a non-profit organization located at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel which relies exclusively on private donations and revenue from events, projects and programs.