

Lina Kolesnikova calls for a reassessment of security in all public areas of critical transport hubs to prevent a repetition of January's Domodedovo airport attack in Moscow which killed 37 people

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Transportation systems are always a subject of intense public attention and control. The large numbers of people using major transport arteries make the system very vulnerable to attack, as the use of protective measures are restricted by necessity to ensure high throughput.

The Lockerbie disaster and the 11 September 2001 attacks changed the face of aviation security. Significant efforts and improvements have since made it more difficult for terrorists to perpetrate an attack. But while most of the efforts and money go into looking for weapons or explosives at checkpoints, in order to prevent a hijacking or mid air explosion, serious gaps in security at airports and terminals have been neglected, or at least left without sufficient attention.

Huge investments into sophisticated equipment for individual passenger checks before boarding has resulted in a lack of security measures for the physical protection of people on the ground. Effectively, this insecurity is a by-product of improvement in airline security. Long lines of people expecting pre-flights security checks, as well as at check-in, are tempting targets for terrorist attacks. Flight departure and arrival information could also "help" terrorists to target certain nationalities at counters or in arrival halls.

Flight check-in arrangements in many airports are being continuously addressed to reduce queues and crowds, often through the use of online procedures and self check-in machines. This helps, of course, but security lines and specific spots at arrival gates are left less-well protected, if at all. One can easily work out that there are spots like this in every airport, whether at border control points or in waiting halls open to travellers and those who are meeting them.

Airports are by definition public places requiring relatively free access. Airport terminals operate in two zones – secure areas and public areas – with screening technology installed on entry to the secure zones. As many news reports have shown since 9/11, there are problems even in the secure areas, with access points often poorly supervised (for example, journalists have successfully brought weapons or explosives into secure area or on board aircraft). There are also limited or no checks on personnel working in such facilities as restaurants, cafés and shops, who also have access to

both public and secure parts of the airport. Adding to the complexity of enforcing security is the financial pressure of running an airport. In recent years, due to economic pressures, many airports have added retail facilities in public areas to generate revenues. Airports even advertise themselves as special shopping zones with a wide choice of boutiques. Airports also increasingly mix high-security aviation with other modes of transportation that get much lower security

attention. Across Europe, most airport hubs have train stations inside or near the terminals. Keeping in mind that most of these facilities were built decades ago with an approach to security which, while acceptable at that time, is now woefully inadequate.

A systematic, risk-driven approach is often unequally employed when it comes to the security of airports. That is to say, sometimes it seems the security of airlines alone is taken into consideration, while a systematic approach to security of the supporting systems and operations is not guaranteed. Instead, an incident-driven approach, by which an incident in one place leads to widespread overreaction and demands for quick fixes, has been adopted by almost all airline and airport security communities around the world.

It is true to say that the task of securing transport hubs is far from easy. Terrorists tactics are dynamic – we have had a proof that in October 2010 when al-Qaeda tried to use explosives planted in cargo in Saudi Arabia. The Mumbai scenario – an attack by armed militants on a city's streets – could be easily adapted by any terrorist group planning an attack on a public place as an airport. It does not require special knowledge to carry out such an attack, and the consequences could be truly devastating.

On 24 January 2011 at 4pm, a suicide bomber blew himself up in the international flights arrival hall at the largest Russian Moscow airport, Domodedovo, as

passengers from several arriving international flights were leaving the airport after clearing immigration and customs. Thirty-seven people died and more than 130 were seriously wounded. Like the majority of airports, Domodedovo has a freely accessible arrivals area. Metal detection frames and explosive trace detection equipment had been installed at the airport entrances but did not function that day. The installation of these detectors had actually been as a response by the Domodedovo airport authorities to an attack in 2004 in which two airliners were blown up. But, because of long waiting lines and passengers complains, they were not constantly used. In response to the attack, Russian authorities ordered 100 per cent security screening of all passengers and visitors entering airports, as well as their baggage, across the country. Similar measures were ordered to protect train stations (which is even more challenging due to short-range train systems using train stations and supporting daily commuters). These measures concentrate on protecting the perimeter of certain areas (such as airports), and cannot provide the required level of security, protection and attack deterrence inside the areas. These measures will likely be short-lived, and airports will return to "normal" in a matter of months. The Domodedovo attack served as a striking illustration how difficult it is to prevent attacks against soft targets, the resourcefulness of militants in identifying such targets and the fixation militants have on aviation-related targets.

Modern history is replete with other attacks on airports, and this attack in Domodedovo was not the first of its kind. On 27 December 1985, militant members of the Palestinian Abu Nidal Organisation attacked the counters of the Israeli National Airline at Vienna and Rome international airports. As a result, 19 people were killed and almost 140 injured. Similarly, in June 2007, an al-Qaeda cell in Glasgow, Scotland, tried to perpetrate an attack on an airport building using a Jeep containing a bomb. Luckily, this attack failed. One of the terrorists was killed as a result of the failure. In a more recent incident in a southern province of the Philippines, on 5 August 2010, two people were killed and dozens injured when a bomb exploded in a terrorist's rucksack close to an airport building.

Airports are trying to adapt new approaches for coping with the risks of terrorist attacks. Some of them (in the US and the UK, for example) have scrutinised the experience of Israel with its multi-layered security at airports. This multi-layered approach allows the first round of controls being conducted outside the densely packed areas of the terminal. Further control points are maintained at various stages as passengers and accompanying people progress towards their check-in points and flights. For example, trained interviewers question every passenger in the check-in queue to identify potential terrorists. This Israeli-style security is designed to detect bombers rather than bombs – it concentrates on the passengers rather than their luggage. Every passenger in the queue for the check-in at Ben-Gurion airport, or for any El Al flight



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elsewhere, is questioned, if only for a few seconds, by a trained officer. Such trained personnel can basically identify and select suspects within a few seconds. Such assessment is based on human reactions such as body language and facial expressions more than verbal responses. The important thing to remember here is that the most effective security measure at airports should be behavioural profiling rather than racial profiling.

The US Transportation Security Administration (TSA) decided to adopt this Israeli behavioural profiling approach and introduced its own plain clothes officers trained in what the agency calls “non-intrusive behaviour observation and analysis”. They should mingle with crowds, looking for signs of potential trouble in physical behaviour. The TSA has more than 3,000 behavioural detection officers at 161 of the 450 or so commercial airports in the United States. They work near checkpoints, but they are also present elsewhere in airport terminals. US security officials are doubtful whether their system will be as successful as that in Israel, however – Israel has only one international airport but the US has more than 450. In public areas, experts say, behavioural detection can be useful as part of a protection programme that also includes sophisticated intelligence gathering.

Some international airports have pushed perimeters further out of the airport buildings. In India, for example, free access to some terminals is only permitted once a ticket and identity documents have been presented. Others, meanwhile, implement

Stop and search: Moscow has raised security on all transport hubs, but critics argue such measures are unsustainable

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detection layers inside the buildings.

There are other possibilities too, and more traditional approaches and detection technologies can be developed as well. For example, in 2008, Russian Aeroflot presented a mobile canine detection system. The main components of this set are a mobile device for retaining of gas components of explosives and specially-trained Sulimov sniffer dogs. These unique dogs are Siberian husky and jackal hybrids, and have been bred for this purpose. Because of their acute sense of smell, inherited from the jackal, and temperature resilience they can work in temperatures as low as -70C and in the heat up to +40C. They also have perfect weight-size parameters which allow them to move in narrow spaces. These dogs could be a solid solution for dealing with the threat of human bombs (when explosives are placed inside of human body) against which no technological solutions yet exists.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning airport design as an area to which security awareness and technology can probably contribute more. One can consider better segmenting airports, while providing for a layer of isolation between different sub-areas to limit the possible impact of an attack. Overall, a wide range of detection and protection methods might be further implemented in airports, although it is essential to maintain balance between the convenience of passengers and other people at airports and the need for appropriate and well-conceived security measures.