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Checkpoint or Chokepoint: Aviation Security Lessons from Istanbul and Brussels

By Eugene EG Tan

Synopsis

International airports are highly secured buildings, because they are attractive targets for individuals or groups seeking to make a statement, be it out of political, religious, or social frustrations. Some security experts have suggested that instituting more checkpoints to scan visitors will increase security, but some are sceptical.

Commentary

THERE HAVE been several attacks by terrorists on major international airports in the past year. In the latest attack on 28 June 2016, a suicide gun-and-bomb attack was carried out by three men at Istanbul Ataturk Airport, causing at least 36 deaths. Another airport in Istanbul, Sabiha Gökçen, was also attacked earlier, on 23 December 2015, by the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) causing one death.

While it would be easy to discount Istanbul as a prime target because of its proximity to the conflict in Syria, the attacks on Brussels Zaventem Airport on 22 March 2016 remind us that terrorist attacks can hit any international airport in the world. On that day, three men detonated suicide vests inside the airport, causing 16 deaths and injuring hundreds more. Moreover, while these attacks have been largely attributed to ISIS and other terrorist organisations like the TAK, there was a smaller scale incident where a homemade bomb was detonated at Shanghai Pudong Airport on 12 June 2016 by a man thought to have huge gambling debts, injuring four people.

To Check or Not to Check

The latest attack at Ataturk airport happened just outside the airport, before the security screening checkpoint at the entrance to the airport. The attack at Zaventum and Pudong airports were in the general public area of the airport concourse, located inside the airport. The attack on Sabiha Gökçen involved mortar shells launched from outside the perimeter of the airport, and away from the terminal buildings. These attacks highlight the difficulty of airport security and the large area that needs to be secured.

It is thus an often-asked question where checkpoints should be placed, how stringent should the checks be, and what purpose would a security checkpoint serve, or should there even be security checkpoints before the transit area.

Proponents of ultimate security would champion the security model that Tel Aviv Ben Gurion Airport reportedly employs, where all vehicles and persons entering the airport are stopped at a distance from the airport and asked a few innocuous questions. It is through this method that suspicious activity can be picked up by the security personnel stationed at that checkpoint. While this ensures that terrorists are kept away from the airport complex, this also increases the time needed for passengers to get to the airport.

On the other hand, the large public area in Brussels Zaventum enabled the suicide bombers to walk into the terminal building without much fuss, blending with the many travellers present. Similarly, the homemade bomb attack at Pudong International showed the ease of bringing a bomb into the public areas of some airports around the world.

Istanbul Ataturk, being a major international gateway in a restive region, had hardened its security post-Brussels, instituting a checkpoint scanning everyone entering the airport building. What stood out in the Istanbul Ataturk attack was the level of planning required to land a disruptive attack on the airport proper. A diversionary bomb attack was set off in the car park to trigger the emergency response, resulting in the thinning of the security at the checkpoint. A secondary bomb was then triggered at the checkpoint, where scores of people were waiting to clear security checks. The blast and the resulting damage and confusion allowed a tertiary suicide attack inside the terminal building.

Effectiveness in Moving Checkpoints

Following the Brussels Zaventum attacks, there have been calls to strengthen security screening of passengers before allowing access to the public access areas. However, ACI Europe, which promotes the collective interest of Europe's airports, had warned that additional checks on people entering the public areas of the airport could be disruptive and potentially create new security vulnerabilities by moving rather than securing the target.

It is of note that the Istanbul Ataturk attacks showed the prophetic nature of ACI Europe's warning, with most of the casualties having resulted from the secondary attack at the checkpoint. The checkpoint was situated at the entrance of the terminal,

where taxis and cars drop off passengers. Heavy traffic flows meant that the crowds waiting to clear the checkpoints were effectively sitting ducks for a terrorist attack.

In short, this checkpoint was situated in an area that had not been designed for security scanning, and had effectively become a chokepoint for people wanting to enter the terminal building.

However, as deplorable as loss of life may be, the checkpoint largely protected the airport terminal itself because the force of the attack was kept outside the public area of the terminal. Only one suicide bomber made it past the checkpoint into the terminal building, and he was very swiftly identified as a bomber and tackled to the ground by a security guard.

Comparatively, the suicide bombers at Brussels Zaventem had no checkpoints to stop them, and caused tremendous damage to the airport itself. Consequently, while Brussels Zaventem was completely closed for twelve days after the attack (and progressively reopened), Istanbul Ataturk was up and running just hours after.

Tragedy of Unintended Consequences

It is equally pertinent to note the unintended consequences created by checkpoints. For example, the restrictions on Liquids, Aerosols, and Gels (LAGs) on planes mean that LAG bottles containing more than 100ml are discarded at the security checkpoint. This can be a potential weapon should a large amount of hazardous material be thrown into the same bin by 'innocuous'-looking passengers. Hence, while checkpoints can keep intruders out, checkpoints are also a double-edged sword because of the vulnerable chokepoints that they may unwittingly create.

Airports around the world should carefully consider their individual security needs and flow of human traffic when situating and setting up a checkpoint. The potential danger in rashly moving checkpoints to unsuitable locations is often understated, and more weight should be given to considerations such as ease of access by visitors to the airport, cost of security, and the suitability of areas used for additional screening.

In conclusion, airport administrators need also to realise that checkpoints are not a silver bullet to prevent intrusion, and they can be bypassed by people who seek to circumvent security checks through a variety of means, including insider cooperation or diversionary tactics. Checkpoints, if placed strategically and used effectively, can however better detect and prevent would-be terrorists from entering a sensitive area.

In the wake of these terror attacks, airport authorities need to carefully analyse the risks and benefit that may result from instituting additional checkpoints. Checkpoints may give the illusion of strengthened security against terrorists, but it is the safety of passengers and the continuity of operations at the airport that should be the primary concern of airports.

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