

Why the World's Largest Terror Target Has Never Experienced Terrorism.

“LESSONS LEARNED from El Al.”

“Today, this morning, there’s going to be an attack.” This mindset is what makes Ben Gurion, Israel’s international airport, arguably the safest airport in the world. Israeli sky marshal, Mordechai Rachamim, feels the American attitude should take note to Israel’s security successes.

Ben Gurion Airport Security is comparable to U.S. secret service. Once a ticket is purchased, the buyer name is sent to Israeli intelligence and Interpol to be researched and cross-referenced with terrorism databases. (To request your files, visit http://current.newsweek.com/budgettravel/2008/12/whats_in_your_government_trave.html) Cars are inspected by armed guards upon entrance, and 50% of all airport staff are armed undercover agents. Trained profiler agents question and screen travelers, intuitively looking for suspicious activity, body language, behavior.

Nearly five years after Sept. 11, 2001, US airport security remains obstinately focused on intercepting bad things -- guns, knives, explosives. It is a reactive policy, aimed at preventing the last terrorist plot from being repeated. The 9/11 hijackers used box cutters as weapons, so sharp metal objects were barred from carry-on luggage. Would-be suicide terrorist Richard Reid tried to ignite a bomb in his shoe, so now everyone’s footwear is screened for tampering. Earlier this month British authorities foiled a plan to blow up airliners with liquid explosives; as a result, toothpaste and cologne have become air-travel contraband.

Of course the Israelis check for bombs and weapons too, but always with the understanding that things don’t hijack planes, terrorists do -- and that the best way to detect terrorists is to focus on intercepting not bad things, but bad people. To a much greater degree than in the United States, security at El Al and Ben Gurion depends on intelligence and intuition -- what Rafi Ron, the former director of security at Ben Gurion, calls the human factor.

- Jeff Jacoby, Globe Columnist
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The TSA screens for threatening objects, and reported confiscating 13,709,211 items in 2006 alone. Instead of focusing on finding objects like knives and guns, Israel feels that, “the best way to detect terrorists is to focus on intercepting not bad things, but bad people.” “Profiling” is taboo in the

U.S., but is central to security operations in Israel. This consideration of the human factor and what is possible, as opposed to an equal-risk assumption (unstated assumption that every passenger poses the same risk of being a threat), is what makes Israel’s security so successful. Ariel Merari, an Israeli terrorism expert who has written about aviation security, said ethnic profiling is both effective and unavoidable, despite its politically incorrect nature.

In 2005, the United States implemented SPOT, Screening Passengers by Observation Technique, a derivative of Israel’s security operations, which trains security personnel to identify specific micro-expressions. This technique, developed by renowned psychologist Paul Ekman PhD, can be demoed at mettonline.com/site/training.aspx. It is not completely accurate, because other factors influence behavior and expressions such as mental disorders and medications, but is currently being developed.

Security expert, Bruce Scheneir, feels differently. He says, “Instead of wasting money [on airport security], we would be far safer as a nation if we invested in intelligence, investigation and emergency response....We need to defend against the broad threat of terrorism, not against specific movie plots. Security is most effective when it doesn’t require us to guess. We need to focus resources on intelligence and investigation: identifying terrorists, cutting off their funding and stopping them regardless of what their plans are. We need to focus resources on emergency response: lessening the impact of a terrorist attack, regardless of what it is.”

So what does this mean? Airport security has come a long way, and continuing to rethink air travel risk will make the industry safer and more resilient.



I was a little disappointed when I first bought this item, because the functionality is limited. My 5 year old son pointed out that the passenger’s shoes cannot be removed. Then, we placed a deadly fingernail file underneath the passenger’s scarf, and neither the detector doorway nor the security wand picked it up. My son said “that’s the worst security ever!”. But it turned out to

be okay, because when the passenger got on the Playmobil B757 and tried to hijack it, she was mobbed by a couple of other heroic passengers, who only sustained minor injuries in the scuffle, which were treated at the Playmobil Hospital.

The best thing about this product is that it teaches kids about the realities of living in a high-surveillance society. My son said he wants the Playmobil Neighborhood Surveillance System set for Christmas. I've heard that the CC TV cameras on that thing are pretty worthless in terms of quality and motion detection, so I think I'll get him the Playmobil Abu-Gharib Interrogation Set instead.

Re:Think...

security. Regardless of social taboos, methods not used in the U.S. can work more efficiently. Are there ways of integrating new methods to improve security without social outrage? What other methods are there that can help mitigate risk?

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