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Flying is safer than you think

By EDWARD H. KAPLAN AND BOAZ GOLANY

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Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab nearly succeeded in downing a Northwest passenger jet over Detroit on Christmas Day. President Barack Obama has laid the blame for this egregious security breach on the inability of US intelligence services to sew together individual pieces of information that, viewed collectively, would surely have raised an alarm. Others have suggested that Israeli airport security practices as exemplified by El Al need to be implemented to prevent such violations. But in spite of Abdulmutallab's attempted briefs bombing, we think that flying remains safe.

Consider Israeli passenger screening, which certainly is different from the typical US experience. All passengers are interviewed by smart, young (some would say hip), alert and regularly rotated (and refreshed) agents, with second and third round questions dependent upon answers to earlier queries. Is this your first trip to Israel? Where are you going and why? Have you any relatives there? What city do they live in? What neighborhood? What street address? What was the last holiday you celebrated?

Throughout such interviews, the manner in which these (sometimes intrusive) questions are answered matters more than the answers themselves - is the person calm or nervous, does a person take offense when offense should be taken (why are you wearing that star around your neck?) - with the goal of detecting contrasts to a set of carefully constructed and validated profiles of persons who travel safely to and from Israel.

And indeed, those of us who regularly fly El Al recognize that the most dangerous part of the trip is driving to the airport.

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BUT ISRAEL is not the United States. About 10.5 million passengers pass through Ben-Gurion Airport each year; in the US, more than 60 million passengers take to the skies each month. And, while putting together profiles for typical visitors to Israel is challenging enough, what exactly would be the profile for someone flying to JFK, O'Hare, LAX or, for that matter, Detroit? There is no question that in retrospect, Abdulmutallab seems like an obvious case, but with 60 million passengers flying around the country each month, what sounds like a failure to connect the dots after the fact might be more akin to finding the proverbial needle in the haystack beforehand.

This is not to say that improvements are not possible. There are two main systems for preventing terrorists from attacking passenger flights. The first includes the visa application process, various terror watch and no-fly lists and additional reports from intelligence and law enforcement partners, while the second is the "last minute" defense provided by on-site airline security screening. President Obama has expressed his concerns with the former; here we speak to the latter. Technology has improved and certainly should be deployed where it can help.

Full body scanners do have the capability to detect explosives such as those Abdulmutallab had placed in his underwear (as do other scanners such as millimeter wave detectors), yet some are offended by the use of such technologies on the grounds of modesty or invasion of privacy. But the images produced by such scans are not equivalent to pornographic photos. While a person might recoil at the sight of such an image knowing that it was (s)he who was scanned, the reverse does not work - if presented with many scanned images, one would be very hard pressed to identify oneself as the person in the picture, let alone have others do the same.

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Proposed practice would completely separate the scanners reading the images and the scannees being checked, so there is no serious fear of somehow "confronting" the person who just "saw you naked." We believe that such scanning should receive the same respect accorded to necessary physical medical exams. And in any event, such private offense pales relative to the improvement in safety such scans would offer us all.

NO SECURITY screening system is foolproof, whether based on psychology or technology or individual pieces of hard won intelligence. Just as businesses change their products in response to the demands placed upon them by consumers, terrorists change their tactics in response to the demands placed upon them by homeland security and counterterrorism measures. As long as terrorists seek to inflict harm upon us, no amount of security screening will totally eliminate the threat of terrorism in the skies just as no amount of screening the blood supply can guarantee the elimination of blood-borne infections.

The real question is, what level of risk are we willing to tolerate in exchange for the benefits we gain from taking such risks? In principle we could eliminate road accidents if we just stopped driving; similarly we could eliminate airborne terror if we just stopped flying. And that latter exchange would signal victory for the terrorists.

So where are we left? In spite of the Christmas near-miss over Detroit, the real risk of flying is truly tiny, with or without the added terror scare.

It is not even obvious to us that the intelligence community suffered a systemic failure. After all, though unannounced and never tabulated, think how many times the system has truly worked by deterring would-be attackers from even attempting to cross security in the first place. Concern about airline safety has its place, but we have no time for fear. After all, we have a plane to catch.

Edward H. Kaplan is the William N. and Marie A. Beach Professor of Management Sciences at the Yale School of Management. Boaz Golany is the dean of the Faculty of Industrial Engineering and Management and Samuel Gorney Professor of Engineering at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. Together they codirect the Daniel Rose Technion-Yale Initiative in Homeland Security and Counterterror Operations Research.

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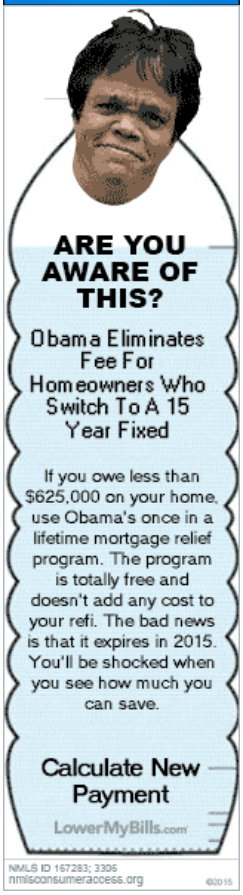

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