



27 February 2012

To the Secretary of the Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications:

As an academic who studies terrorist organisations, particularly those emanating from Southeast Asia which have been of greatest concern to Australia's national security, I write with concern regarding the recently tabled Aviation Transport Security Amendment (Screening) Bill 2012. I wrote an op-ed in the *Daily Telegraph* in August 2011 noting that the scanners (which were then being tested) would not actually improve security from terrorist attacks, and I stand by that op-ed today. I strongly urge the House not to proceed with the tabled bill. Put simply, leaving aside any privacy, civil rights, or health concerns, introducing full body scanners into Australian airports will not actually improve airport security, and may in fact lead to an increase in threats from terrorist organisations.

A sufficiently knowledgeable and patient terrorist organisation will always find holes in the physical security systems (particularly those, such as at airports, that require a high throughput of civilians). After the security measures that have already been implemented – X-ray machines for bags, metal detectors, and explosive trace detection (and, one would hope, security checks for all airport personnel in the sterile area) – the additional security provided by additional measures and more technology at the security checkpoint is essentially zero, while the cost, not only in terms of buying, maintaining, and operating machines, but also in terms of hassles for passengers, rises rapidly.

This is for two reasons. First, once a terrorist organisation is at the point of needing to use a suicide bomber to attack a target (which is the situation that terrorists attacking commercial passenger planes find themselves in now), the primary cost to the terrorist organisation comes in recruiting, training, and equipping the suicide bomber. The bomb itself, and the delivery mechanism, are only small components of the cost. Terrorists are unlikely to be deterred from attacking airplanes any more by full body scanners than they were by the requirement to divide their liquids into 100-ml bottles (a 2006 security measure which was followed by two major bomb plots against US planes). As has been shown with all previous checkpoint security measures, terrorists will eventually find a way to game the system if they are really determined. Despite the Minister's assertions, there is no reason to believe full body scanners will be any more difficult to game than any other measure. Full body scanners (and highly intrusive patdowns) have been used in US prisons for years, but there is no lack of contraband that has somehow slipped through.

Second, as more and more visible security measures are added to airports, the value of attacking airports and airplanes increases for terrorist organisations. This is because they can now show they have made a mockery of security measures – the introduction of full body scanners in Australian airports would lead to airports and airplanes, in essence, becoming more valuable as targets for terrorist groups than they traditionally have been. In the US, for example, the 2001 Richard Reid plot led to the examination of shoes, the 2006 liquid bomber plot led to bans on liquids, Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab plot in 2009 led to the introduction of full body scanners, and 2010 cargo plane bomb plot led to further security measures. This is a fundamentally reactive way of thinking about counterterrorism. As the examples indicate, US policies have not lead to a drop-off in attempted attacks, but shifts to increasingly creative attacks that explicitly seek to make a mockery of airport security measures. Beyond the reasonable security measures that Australia has already implemented, following the US lead

risks drawing Australia into an aviation security arms race with terrorists that the government cannot win in the long run.

My concern is that this counterproductive focus on physical security at the checkpoint is drawing attention and resources away from measures that will actually mitigate the terrorist threat to Australia. The primary obstacle for terrorist organisations in carrying out terrorist attacks is not the physical security measures taken at the target, but the resources, time, and expertise to source materials, plan the attack and recruit members. The money that will apparently be used on buying more technology for airports should instead be used on more proactive policing and intelligence work, both in Australia and overseas. The ultimate solution to aviation security is not to begin an unwinnable arms race; it is to decrease the number of terrorists, and the ability of those terrorists to recruit and plan attacks.

I should note that everything in this letter should be taken as my own views, and not those of the University of Sydney.

Sincerely,

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