

OPINION

End chaos that airport security issues cause

Facial recognition technology could reduce some of the commotion sparked by alerts

By SHELDON JACOBSON

You are comfortably seated at Gate A11 waiting for your flight to board, coffee in hand, when the loudspeaker announces that your terminal must be evacuated due to a security issue.

At that point, thousands of people scurry to the exits, where they gather outside the terminal until the Transportation Security Administration determines what happened, why it happened, and eventually, that the security threat has been resolved before allowing people to reenter the terminal.

The cause of such events is varied. It may be that a person entered the "sterile" side of the terminal unscreened, such as through a fire door. It could be a bag that was not appropriately screened, as what happened at San Diego International in August 2022. It could be a bomb threat, which occurred at San Francisco International in July 2022. It could be something as benign as an unattended bag, which led to a terminal evacuation at JFK International in July 2022. It could also be a technical error, such as what happened recently at DFW International Airport.

U.S. airports are not alone. On June 29, a passenger entered the sterile side of the airport via a fire door at Gatwick Airport, outside London. This required all passengers to be evacuated, including some who had already boarded their plane for departure, creating what was described as chaos in managing the rescreening process.

When any type of event occurs that compromises airport security, the ripple effect creates an endless stream of turmoil. It could affect light-rail public transportation, which brings passengers to and from the airport and may need to be halted while the security breach is resolved. It affects airport concessions, particularly food outlets, which must also evacuate, leaving food items unattended that will need to be discarded upon their return.

It obviously affects the airlines, which must reschedule and reaccommodate the thousands of passengers on the flights that are delayed or canceled.



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Passengers wait in line at a TSA security checkpoint in Terminal C at DFW International Airport. Facial recognition for identity verification is the game changer for airport security, writes Sheldon Jacobson, because it reduces the reliance on threat detection for security and places it where it belongs — namely, on people.

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However, the biggest threat may be to the thousands of people who must gather outside the airport terminal, waiting for the security breach to be resolved. This often takes hours, after which those who are still able to fly that day must be rescreened, taking several more hours even under the most favorable conditions.

Anytime large groups of people cluster in or around an airport terminal, such congestion creates risk. The nonsterile side of airports, labeled soft targets, are patrolled by law enforcement officers and overseen with surveillance cameras. Such

tools provide significant deterrence to anyone approaching this area with intent to cause harm.

Yet large groups of people remain vulnerable. So why does the TSA not take steps to harden such soft targets?

First, the cost of hardening the nonsterile side of airports would be prohibitively expensive. With a finite budget, on the order of \$10 billion, to protect all transportation systems in the nation, including over 400 commercial airports, there is simply not enough money available.

Second is priorities. Protecting the sterile side of airports, which is the direct portal into the air system, demands more attention and buys down more risk than any risk in the nonsterile side. Since the TSA uses multiple layers to provide security, those layers that are more directly adjacent to and funnel into the air system demand the most attention.

Third, hardening the nonsterile side of airports is impractical. It would push the sterile area farther

out, widening its footprint with little security benefit gained. The negative impact on passenger flow would be prohibitive, as airport layouts are not designed to handle such a change.

Are there alternatives to where evacuated passengers can gather? Unfortunately, there aren't. Once again, airports are designed to facilitate air travel, not to accommodate evacuations.

The good news is that since terminal evacuations are somewhat uncommon, any person intent on exploiting such a vulnerability must know beforehand when they will occur and where they will occur. Of course, such actions would create a security vulnerability, since a security breach may be instigated to elicit a terminal evacuation, with the purpose of creating risk.

So what can the TSA do to minimize the need for terminal evacuations?

Facial recognition for identity verification is the game changer for airport security. This biometric tech-

nology reduces the reliance on threat detection for security and places it where it belongs, namely, on people. Then unscreened baggage, unattended bags or passengers accidentally opening a fire door all become moot, since only known people to the TSA are in the airport.

The TSA is testing facial recognition technologies at 16 airports this summer. The major hurdle is privacy concerns, which may delay its deployment to all airports for several more years.

And with such advances, the need to evacuate terminals is reduced, resulting in a more secure air travel experience for all. Is this not why the TSA was created?

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