

AIRPORT PROTESTS: OFF-AIRPORT ISSUES BECOMING ON-AIRPORT CHALLENGES



On 6 September 2016 nine Black Lives Matter protesters managed to get airside at London City Airport resulting in the airport being closed for 6 hours.

Airport terminals have long provided protestors with a safe and effective environment for spreading international awareness of an array of issues. More often than not, demonstrations are conducted peacefully, causing little to no interruption of services and procedures, but what are the risks associated with protests in an airport setting? **Lucy Rawlings** discusses these issues and considers whether our right to protest is impinging on the effectiveness of our security measures.

"FREE SPEECH, EXERCISED BOTH INDIVIDUALLY AND THROUGH A FREE PRESS, IS A NECESSITY IN ANY COUNTRY WHERE PEOPLE ARE THEMSELVES FREE."

- Theodore Roosevelt, 1918.

Airports have a long history of attracting protest groups who use them as a stage for a global audience to hear their concerns. Many airports, including London Heathrow, have stated that they 'support the right to peaceful protest' within their doors as long as they do not disrupt the safe and smooth running of the airport. In many respects this is admirable; they are supporting the right to freedom of speech and freedom to protest, without which we would not have many of the liberties we exercise today: equal opportunities, women's right to vote, or the right to join a trade union.

But, in the current climate, with a focus on security increasing, at what point do we view these protests as a potential threat and declare airports to be an inappropriate venue for public demonstration? At what point do 'off-airport issues' become an 'on-airport challenge' and a threat to the safety of those who enter the parameter?

Airport protests are often staged by groups whose issues are not airport-related as they are seen as an effective method of reaching a broad and international audience. Airports are also considered a safe environment for protesters themselves since the police are unlikely to storm a terminal or turn water cannons on protesters - as they did on the student protestors on the streets of London in 2010, or use tear gas and pepper spray, as they did during July this year against civil rights protestors in Arizona - for fear of damaging the airport or causing harm

to travellers and employees. In recent years many laws have been passed, which limit the number of places in which groups are allowed to protest, often requiring permits or limiting them to certain public spaces. Generally, a permit is required for a protest to be staged at an airport and they are often granted providing the protest is to be conducted in a contained and peaceful manner. However, many protests take place in a 'hit-and-run' style, whereby the protestors enter, cause a disruption, and either abruptly leave, are arrested, or escorted from the premises. This raises concerns around the ability of risk-imposing individuals to enter the airport undetected and cause a disturbance. Genuine protestors are, generally, harmless, but they are an example of how easy it could be to enter and cause greater harm, or to potentially use a protest as a front for an attack.

There have been many examples of these 'hit-and-run' protests occurring in airports all over the world, some causing damage and others merely a disturbance. On 25 June 2013, five men dumped human faeces at the entrance to Cape Town International Airport. Witnesses described how the men arrived in a black car, unloaded containers covered in blue plastic bags, put them onto a trolley and brought them to the airport's entrance where the contents were dumped. Some was also spilt near the escalators leading to the airport's restaurants. One of the men explained that, by staging their protest at the airport, they were hoping to send a message to the United Nations that, "The city does not care about the health of black people". The men and those in their community, understood to be known as 'Europe', an informal settlement in the Guguletu township bordering Cape Town International Airport, had been living with unsanitary toilet facilities, which they explained had been filled up for three months. Airport operations were not affected by the incident, but the men were arrested.

It would be safe to say that this protest would have made an impact on those unfortunate enough to witness, and smell, it. However, aside from that, protests which occur in this way create a significant distraction for airport security, staff and travellers. While these men were being dealt with someone with greater negative intent could have seen this as an opportune moment to act and, with security staff distracted, go undetected and



A Belgian feminist movement, LilithS, staged a protest at Liege Airport on 26 August 2014 (Credit: LilithS / Lucien Keller)

cause greater damage than may have occurred otherwise, if at all. In this case one must also question how these men managed to bring such questionably shaped and wrapped containers into the airport grounds unchallenged.

In August 2014, a similar style was taken by LilithS, a Belgian feminist activist group, when they poured hundreds of litres of fake blood in the main entrance to Liege Airport and over some of the check-in desks. The blood was to symbolise what they believe to be the 'slaughter' of Palestinians in Gaza by Israel, and they targeted the airport to protest its alleged facilitation of the transport of arms to Israel. The members wore T-shirts bearing the colours of the Palestinian flag and the slogans 'Terrorism is real', and 'Free Palestine'. Behind the main site of their

"...LilithS, a Belgian feminist activist group, poured hundreds of litres of fake blood in the main entrance to Liege Airport and over some of the check-in desks..."

protest they hung a banner declaring, 'How many tons of weapons for so many litres of blood?'. Aside from creating a potential distraction, these women caused criminal damage to the airport. Should this be tolerated? It is a key consideration for the future of protests held at airports.

Other protests that occur in this 'sudden hit style' do not cause any damage to the airport but can cause immense upheaval. In February 2013, members of the Ukrainian-based feminist group, Femen, entered Rio de Janeiro's international airport and stripped down in protest against sex tourism, which they stated rises about 30% with the arrival of European tourists around the time of the Rio Carnival. The women, wearing only their knickers, shouted slogans including, "Sex tourists go home", and, "Brazil is not a whore house". The topless women naturally drew the attention of all passengers, airport employees and security officials; a potentially opportune moment for somebody with more sinister intent to do something (e.g. enter a restricted area) undetected.

Noisy protests, aside from annoying travellers, can pose a large risk as not only are they distracting, but the noise



Anti-pollution protesters lying down in a terminal at London Heathrow in 2015 (Credit: HACAN)



On 8 February 2013, Femen activists stage a protest against sex tourism at Rio de Janeiro's international airport.

they create could, particularly if they are a very large group, muffle out the noise created by an attack allowing it to go on for longer before anyone realises what is going on. This is a challenge faced on a regular basis at Frankfurt Airport, Germany, where every Monday anti-noise campaigners descend on the airport and start chanting slogans to demonstrate the disturbance they feel aircraft movements have on their lives. In October 2011, Frankfurt Airport opened their 4th runway creating not only new flight paths but amendments to existing ones. As soon as the runway opened, local residents started protesting. The fact that this group congregate (with, as reported in 2015, between 600 and 3000 participants) with such regularity increases the risk as terrorists are able to plan their actions around an expected disruption.

Formulating an appropriate response is a challenge when protests take place in the manner of the Femen protest in Rio, LilithS in Liege, or other similar one-off events, as it is not always possible to know how and when they are going to occur. The most that can be done is to try and remove the protesters as quickly and efficiently as possible, which can be hard if there are a number of them. But what happens when the protest does not actually take place in the airport itself? This can often cause more of an interruption and delays to airport processes than a protest taking place within it and can pose a large risk to security in the event of an emergency.

On 5 August this year, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters blocked roads leading to London's Heathrow Airport and Birmingham Airport as part of a large, nation-wide demonstration to

raise awareness about the movement. In London, the activists barricaded the junction leading from the M4 motorway causing serious delays to holidaymakers and others wishing to access the airport. Wail Qasim, who was involved in organising the Heathrow protest, stated: "There's a constant disruption of black people's lives in the everyday... in terms of stop and search, increased levels of unemployment... this is an ongoing disruption to black people's lives which they constantly

"...the Black Lives Matter movement deployed nine protesters to London City Airport in a direct protest against the amount of pollution emitted from flights. They gained access to the runway using a dinghy they boarded at the Royal Docks..."

face". A Heathrow spokesperson said they did not believe that anyone missed their flight; but, what would have happened had there been an emergency at the airport? How could an evacuation take place? How could the emergency services get to the airport quickly enough to provide help? In Birmingham that day an ambulance was delayed getting to the hospital due to the protestors blocking the road. Thankfully, the patient was not in a critical state and got to the hospital safely once the ambulance managed to weave its way through the traffic, but what if the emergency services needed to move en masse?

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Although disturbances such as this one may not be a frequent occurrence, they force us to think about ways in which we might be able to make provisions for such events.

This September, the BLM movement deployed nine protesters to London City Airport in a direct protest against the amount of pollution emitted from flights. They gained access to the runway using a dinghy they boarded at the Royal Docks, just a short trip across the marina that surrounds the airport. Once airside, they erected a large wooden tripod, which one man climbed and sat on top of (cleverly, in order to prevent the police immediately intervening as they would have to breach health and safety 'working at height' regulations in order to do so), while the rest chained themselves together around it. The six-hour disruption caused severe delays to flights departing that morning; many flights landing at London City were diverted. BLM stated that they took action in order to "highlight the UK's environmental impact on the lives of black people locally and globally". If we look at it from the activist's perspective, yes, blocking off the runway and delaying people's flights is a great way to get the cause noticed and, of course, make the news. From a passenger's perspective, it is a great annoyance, particularly if they are travelling for business and are on a strict time schedule. From the corporate airline and airport perspective, these delays are very costly and time consuming. And from our perspective, the ones responsible for protecting travellers and those in the aviation industry, the ones who will be bombarded with questions should there be a breach of security or attack, such an ordeal is an unnecessary headache. It raises further questions as to how we can ensure the runway is completely secured from public access? Can we continue to ensure the safety of those within the airport while many members of the security team are distracted with other matters?

Part of the solution does involve monitoring the activities of the better-known groups, such as Black Lives Matter, Plane Stupid and Femen, and deploying sufficient resources to mitigate the risk when armed with the intel that a protest is about to be initiated. Considering that their actions are also publicity stunts, where they rely on media presence, some of the groups advertise their planned actions in order to increase the number of protesters and/or notify the media in advance so that they can be on hand for the photo opportunity.

Protesters on Easter Island also took to the runway during August 2009 over environmental beliefs. They demanded greater controls over who may be allowed to visit the island due do claims that the increasing population is causing harm to the environment and mysterious Moai statues. Their actions caused the island's airport to shut down and left around 600 tourists, hoping to get to the island, stranded in Santiago, Chile. Although only about 20 protesters were involved in occupying the runway it raises concerns when a local population begins to take action against an airport, particularly against the airport of an island 2,360 miles (3,800 kilometres) away from the mainland, and which "must have the security of its operations absolutely guaranteed" (Pablo Ortega, secretary-general of the Chilean aviation agency).

We must also consider the subtler messages that some protests send. In the run-up to the Rio Olympics, the city's civil police force staged a strike in retaliation to the huge budget cuts they were having to deal with as Brazil falls further into recession. One group of officers took themselves down to the arrivals hall at Rio's international airport to greet visitors with banners reading, "Welcome to Hell. Police and fire-fighters don't get paid; Whoever comes to Rio de Janeiro will not be safe." Reports following this told of how security forces have such limited funding that some even have to beg for donations of simple stationary, toilet paper, and cleaning supplies. Governor Francisco Dornelles questioned, "How are people going to feel protected in a city without security?"

The police's protest sent a clear message to the world that Rio was not, at that point, adequately prepared to safely and securely manage the Olympics should an attack occur. Yes,

it attracted the attention of, not just the Brazilian, but also other nations' governments in a bid to find some funding (which was likely the aim of the protest), however, it predominantly highlighted Brazil as an easy target, and the arrival of thousands of spectators and tourists to Rio made it an enticing one. This is a prime example of when an 'off-airport issue' can potentially become an 'on-airport challenge'. Not only does the message sent by the police encourage a potential attack,

but with the emergency services struggling to cope, they are unable to offer adequate support to the airport even in the event of the smallest issue. In this case, it is not the protesters themselves causing a direct problem or threat to security, but rather it is the impact of what they are saying and the ways in which those intending to cause harm interpret it.

We have looked at a variety of different cases that result in the removal of the protesters but sometimes this is



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not always believed to be necessary and the protest is allowed to go on. These are protests which are deemed to be 'peaceful', and do not interrupt the running of the airport. However, even these protests, which appear to be peaceful and under control (including those who hold a permit for their protest) should not be overlooked as a threat.

On 7 October 2014 around 50 Kurdish protesters gathered at Heathrow as part of anti-ISIS demonstrations held across Europe demanding more help for the Kurdish forces trying to hold down the town of Kobani in Syria. At Heathrow, the demonstrators held flags, shouted chants and displayed

placards encouraging passers-by to "Unite against ISIS". Despite the noise they created (one traveller described the atmosphere as 'intimidating') the protest was allowed to continue as they were deemed peaceful and their behaviour passive as they sat and stood in a semi-circle proclaiming their cause.

Despite their peaceful style, we must not fail to remind ourselves of the potential threats large, noisy groups can pose and just how quickly things can descend into chaos. When protesters make up a large group it becomes easy to view them as a collective and for a person with negative intent to become overlooked and seen as 'part of the pack'. It then

"...two women, members of No Borders Iceland, encouraged other passengers to stand with them in order to prevent the flight from departing..."

becomes just as easy for them if they wish to break away and move through other areas as the majority of the focus is on the group who still remain. The security team are, thus, left to rely on their skills of behavioural analysis to assess the tone of the group and try to detect those whose intentions may not be honest and pose a high risk. But, in a large, noisy group it is difficult to identify a baseline of the 'typical' protester: some may be angry, shouting loudly, appearing aggressive, as they are passionate about the cause; some may be calm, happy, even proud of what they are doing; some may be nervous and unsure of how police and by-passers may react to them so they come across as uneasy. They may be young, old, male, female, dressed differently, and all these different people, who come across in different ways, are in the same group! Nightmare.

All the cases we have looked at so far are protests which have taken place within the airport terminals, on runways, and around the airport vicinity. Generally, protesters will simply be removed and only occasionally have charges been made against them. However, in the case of two women who decided to make a protest against the deportation of a Nigerian asylum seeker who was on their flight from Iceland, they seemingly chose the wrong place...on board an Icelandair flight ready to depart Keflavik for Stockholm on 26 May 2016. After boarding the plane, the two women, members of No Borders Iceland, encouraged other passengers to stand with them in order to prevent the flight from departing. After defying cabin crew's requests for them to sit down they were removed by aircraft police, handcuffed and arrested. Later that day they faced police interrogation where they were read the list of crimes they could potentially be facing including failure to obey police orders, and "using unlawful methods to take control of an aircraft".

Frankfurt airport has had to cope with anti-noise protests on a weekly basis.



Plane Stupid anti-airport expansion group blocking main entrance to London Heathrow.



It was understandable that crew would call for assistance to have the women removed if they were being defiant and delaying the aircraft from departing, but the charges they face for simply refusing to sit down seem, perhaps, a tad extreme in comparison to the compromising position that hundreds of protestors put airports around the world in every year. A

hard line has to be taken in situations such as this as it acts as a deterrent to others contemplating similar actions, but where do we draw the line? By allowing protests to be staged in airport terminals we potentially leave open a window of opportunity for attacks to take place. Criminals don't need to get as far as the aircraft in order to cause damage and more people can be

harmed and greater disruption done by hitting a crowded terminal.

Thankfully, we can say that none of the protests which have affected airports have, to date, led to a high security incident or been an obstacle in the evacuation or recovery from an attack, but this does not mean it is out of the realm of possibility. Protests have the potential to cause a plethora of security issues, not just created by the protesters themselves but also in the message they send. It is clear that there is a dilemma, particularly in countries which allow freedom of speech as, without the right to use public spaces to make your views known, free speech gradually becomes obsolete. ■

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