



How do you solve a problem like TSA?

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January 6, 2016 5:00 am | *AEIdeas*

Last December, I participated in briefings in the United Kingdom with some of the world's top security experts. One of the conclusions from those briefings was that al Qaeda remains intent on exploding a bomb on an airline headed to or in the United States.

With all the media focus on Daesh, it is easy to forget al Qaeda remains active. It also is easy to forget that the 9/11 attack shut down the air traffic control system for days and caused enormous financial damage to the airline industry. It took years for the travel and industry to recover.



http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RTX1ZXKS_tsa-e1452019875896.jpg

Travelers make their way through a TSA checkpoint at Reagan National Airport in Washington December 23, 2015.
REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque.

All of this makes the US Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) continued failure to detect bomb components highly troubling. No one who travels wants to open the newspaper to [these paragraphs](http://nypost.com/2015/11/16/tsa-failing-to-detect-weapons-bombs-at-ny-airports-sources/) (<http://nypost.com/2015/11/16/tsa-failing-to-detect-weapons-bombs-at-ny-airports-sources/>):

Security screeners at Kennedy and Newark airports have consistently failed to find weapons and bombs being smuggled by undercover operatives posing as airline passengers, The Post has learned, lapses made all the more alarming by the Paris terror attacks.

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Eight airports around the nation flunked secret safety tests conducted by the Department of Homeland Security, according to the report.

Or [these paragraphs](http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-tsa-steps-up-scrutiny-in-wake-of-fake-bomb-test-20150814-story.html) (<http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-tsa-steps-up-scrutiny-in-wake-of-fake-bomb-test-20150814-story.html>):

If the security lines at the airport seem to be moving a bit slower, it's because the Transportation Security Administration has increased passenger scrutiny following reports that agents failed to detect fake bombs carried by undercover agents.

After news leaked early this summer that 67 of 70 fake bombs got past TSA agents as part of regular security tests, the acting TSA administrator was replaced with Coast Guard Vice Adm. Peter Neffenger, who has called for retraining of all airport security agents by the end of September.

Even more troubling, these misses aren't atypical. TSA has failed to detect bomb components (and other contraband) since its inception. In 2007, [TSA failed to detect](http://www.cnn.com/2007/TRAVEL/10/18/airport.screeners/) (<http://www.cnn.com/2007/TRAVEL/10/18/airport.screeners/>) a stunning 75% of bomb parts at Los Angeles International Airport and 60% at Chicago O'Hare International Airport. Though al Qaeda hasn't succeeded in exploding a bomb on an airplane yet, it did successfully get bombs on airplanes with [Richard Reid in 2001](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_failed_shoe_bomb_attempt) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_failed_shoe_bomb_attempt) and [with Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_failed_shoe_bomb_attempt) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_failed_shoe_bomb_attempt) on Christmas Day in 2009. Both bombers, thankfully, failed to ignite their bombs.

Many Americans are frustrated that they can't bring liquids through airport security today because of the [massive plot to bomb seven airplanes flying from the UK to the US](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_transatlantic_aircraft_plot) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_transatlantic_aircraft_plot) in 2006. A liquid bomb remains a high threat, which makes a recent experience I had a wee bit disconcerting.

Coming home from Costa Rica two weeks ago, my family went through the security mags like we always do. As we waited to board the flight to Houston, the gate agent announced that we could not bring any liquids on the airplane. We had purchased water and coffee for the flight, as we typically do after getting through security. I approached the gate agent to ask why we couldn't bring liquids purchased after security on the airplane. They told me they didn't check for liquids at security because some of the non-US flights didn't ban liquids (i.e., al Qaeda isn't interested in bombing non-US/European flights). To ensure our security, as we boarded the flight, we presented our carry-on luggage to airport workers who casually looked for liquids. I wasn't impressed by the thoroughness of the inspection nor the utter lack of technology used to detect traces of certain chemicals. If I knew the process, I could have easily put a bottle of liquid in my pocket or tucked it in a sweatshirt I carried on the airplane.

I presume this more casual process exists in other countries in Central America, South America, Asia, and Africa where there are flights to places other than America and Europe. If so, it seems to me we have more to worry about than just the capability of domestic TSA screeners to detect bomb parts here. We have extensive vulnerabilities across the system. TSA must significantly improve its detection abilities before al Qaeda succeeds at bringing down an airplane and close loopholes where they exist. Perhaps it is time TSA focuses less on grandma and little Billy and [more on individuals with a nexus to terrorist activities](https://www.aei.org/publication/counterterrorism-activities-must-harness-technology-to-protect-liberty/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/counterterrorism-activities-must-harness-technology-to-protect-liberty/>).

If we are going to have TSA and the inconveniences we experience at airports, can't we make it actually work?

This article was found online at:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-tsa/>