TSA security lapses point to management, training failures, experts say

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Transportation Security Administration officials have acknowledged that a chaotic scene at a Miami airport on Monday night was the result of officers not following proper procedures at a checkpoint.

It was only the latest of several recent headlines that have raised doubts about the agency's effectiveness and spurred some calls for privatization of airport security.

"Yesterday afternoon at Miami International Airport, a Transportation Security Officer (TSO) stopped the X-ray machine at a checkpoint to conduct further screening of a carry-on bag," TSA spokesman Mike England said in a statement Tuesday. "In the process of transitioning other passengers to an adjacent screening lane, standard procedures were not adhered to and the passenger was allowed to depart the checkpoint and proceed into the terminal."

Two security checkpoints were closed as TSA officers and law enforcement searched for the passenger. According to WPEC, nearly 50 flights were delayed. Armed law enforcement officers were recorded detaining a man on a flight.

The TSA said the person was located and questioned and his bag was searched. Officers determined he posed no threat and he was released.

"Consistent with standard operating procedures, TSA is conducting a full after-action review of the response," England said. "TSA is taking this incident seriously and will retrain employees as necessary to ensure compliance with standard operating procedures."

According to aviation security experts, the incident could further erode faith in the TSA for a public that already has concerns about it.

"I don't think the public has a lot of confidence in them," said Anthony Roman, president of global investigation and risk management firm Roman Associates and a former commercial jet pilot.

People hear about failures like this in the media and they experience long lines at the airport, so they know the TSA is not performing optimally.

"In terms of perception," said Seth Kaplan, analyst and managing partner at Airline Weekly, "you certainly can't blame the public for hearing a story like that and questioning their safety."

According to Jeff Price, professor of aviation management at Metropolitan State University of Denver, the Miami incident demonstrates the need for better training for TSA officers and better communication with airport employees.

"It shows the situation wasn't handled in an ideal way," he said.

The issue for some is not so much that the suspicious bag got through, but what they see as an extreme reaction after it did.

"When one overreacts...people start questioning, well, are they really doing their job," said Sheldon H. Jacobson, a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois.

Jim Harper, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute sees it as a justification for "persistent doubts in the public's minds about the TSA" and he places the blame on the government.

"A government agency comes in loud and aggressive," Harper said. If airport security were privatized, he believes the reaction to a bag slipping through the checkpoint would have been different and much less disruptive.

"If it's an airline or airport in charge of things, they do not go ugly fast...They have to balance aggressive security with customer service."

Recent media reports and government investigations have identified gaps and failures in TSA security. CNN reported Tuesday that homeland security officials are concerned about insufficient vetting of aviation workers. An inspector general's investigation found 69 workers in the system who should have been flagged for terrorism-related categories.

According to CNN, part of the reason for this is that the TSA is not authorized to access certain terror watch-lists. Roman said that restriction is appropriate because the information on those lists could jeopardize ongoing CIA and NSA operations if released to other agencies.

In response to the CNN report on employee screening gaps, TSA directed Sinclair to Administrator Peter Neffenger's testimony last week before the House Oversight and

Government Reform Committee. Neffenger acknowledged that changes are needed, but he noted that the workers in question were not actually on terror watch lists.

Earlier this year, according to ABC News, the inspector general reported that out of 70 tests conducted by internal investigators attempting to smuggle mock explosives or banned weapons through checkpoints, TSA agents failed to stop 67 of them.

The inspector general reported to the House Oversight Committee that covert tests of screening at eight airports found "failures in the technology, failures in TSA procedures, and human error. We found layers of security simply missing."

"I think it's as bad as it sounds," Price said, and it reveals problems that have to be fixed.

"They have had a terrible, by anyone's standards, a terrible, terrible failure rate," Roman said.

The TSA does frequently post photos of the various weapons and contraband items that its officers successfully confiscate at checkpoints. The latest batch included batarangs.

The political uproar earlier this year over the failures uncovered by the internal investigations has resulted in a change in leadership at the TSA and several new initiatives. Price said Administrator Neffenger seems to be on the right track, but fixing the systemic problems is going to take time.

Still, experts agree that there will never be a perfect airport security system, and despite the TSA's public struggles, air travel is safer than ever.

"Like everything else involving security or air travel," Roman said, "there is a very, very small element of risk...The question is, is the risk of failure at acceptable levels?"

"To have 100% security would be so prohibitively expensive that it cannot be done," Jacobson said.

Kaplan noted that many of the complaints passengers have about the TSA relate to customer service issues and delays, and only occasionally to actual security lapses like the incident in Miami.

"Generally speaking, everybody recognizes that there hasn't been another 9/11 since 9/11," he said, "so for all of its imperfections, the TSA must be doing something right."

"We have much better aviation security here in the United States than most of the rest of the world," Price said, "even if it might not seem that way sometimes."

The risk of a terrorist attack will always be present, though, and some people have difficulty accepting that reality.

"Terrorism is like the flu," Price said. "It's always going to be there, and every year it's a different strain."

The reports of TSA security gaps come at a time when passenger anxiety is already heightened worldwide by the crash of a Russian airliner in Egypt that may have been bombed by ISIS. The cause of the crash has not been confirmed, but intelligence officials have indicated to CNN that they believe it was the result of a bomb in the cargo hold that may have been put there by an airport worker.

Following initial reports that a bomb may be responsible, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson announced "an additional layer of security" will be instituted at certain overseas airports.

According to Jacobson, this crash could be a wake-up call that leads to "a quantum jump" in scrutiny of airport workers if it turns out that an insider put a bomb on the plane, but until that is confirmed, it is hard to recommend specific changes.

Altering security measures without proper consideration could be as dangerous as doing nothing.

"Security is about balance," Price said. "You don't want to cause one situation when you're trying to solve another." For example, increasing scrutiny of baggage at checkpoints could back up lines further, creating a crowd that is a prime target for a potential active shooter.

Even if terrorists got a bomb onto a plane in Egypt, that does not mean it could be done as easily in the U.S.

"There are lots and lots of good security layers in place," Harper said. Vetting of airport workers is imperfect, but the size of the risk that presents is unclear.

"Is it so bad that we cross a threshold of danger that we should be particularly worried about? I don't know."

There have been a number of incidents in recent years involving corruption and crime by airport workers, though.

Roman pointed to one case of gun smuggling through Hartsfield-Jackson Airport in Atlanta that was broken up by federal authorities in 2014. Weapons, some loaded, were being trafficked on passenger planes for distribution in New York. A former airline employee and current baggage handler were allegedly involved.

"That was a complete and utter failure of procedure," he said.

According to Roman, these events are the product of poor management and training, and improvements to the system are happening too slowly. One fundamental problem he sees is that the average salary for TSA officers is too low.

"When you pay an individual who is supposed to protect the flying public $25,000 a year, that plants the seed for possible corruption...They need to live, they need to support their families. It's not truly a living wage."

While he sees TSA as needing better managers and a reevaluation of training practices and salaries, he rejected the notion of privatization.

"I think it would be a complete disaster."

According to Kaplan, experiments with privatization at smaller airports have had mixed results. Looking at comparable security programs around the world, he sees no strong evidence that private security is inherently more or less effective.

Prior to 9/11, airport security in the U.S. was largely private. That changed after the terrorist attacks, although Kaplan noted, "what happened on 9/11 was not mostly a failure at the security checkpoint...It was an intelligence failure."

Price said privatization would be complicated and expensive, and would require a paradigm shift in how airports operate. It would also be difficult to maintain continuity of operations from one airport to the next.

"I think it sounds like a simple thing to do, but it's not nearly as simple as it sounds," he said. "In fact, there really are no simple solutions."

For Harper, that lack of continuity would be an advantage.

"In a private security environment, you'd have a lot more variety at airports and airlines," he said, and that would be a challenge for terrorists to evade because they could not predict and prepare for security measures as easily.

He has less confidence than others that the TSA can improve security measures while under the constant political pressure a federal agency faces. The apparent mishandling of the situation in Miami Monday night exemplified the problem.

"Congress demands perfect security from this hapless agency," Harper said. "What they can deliver is aggression."

Jacobson cautioned against throwing out universal security protocols, though, even if security were to become private.

"It's less important who's doing the screening and the security process as opposed to what is being done."

This is largely how things have worked with airports that have shifted to private security in recent years. Private employees and contractors handle the screening, but the procedures are still mandated by the TSA.

According to Jacobson, that approach makes sense because security protocols are based on science and analysis. Ignoring the science could be risky, and the cost could be a terrorist attack.

"A person with intent to cause harm to the air system has to be correct just once," he said. "The TSA needs to be correct all of the time."