Interview with Prof. Erroll G. Southers

Prof. Erroll G. Southers is currently visiting Israel and serving as a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT). He was the first Presidential nominee for Assistant Secretary of the TSA, Governor Schwarzenegger's Deputy Director in the California Office of Homeland Security and FBI Special Agent. He is the Associate Director of Research Transition for the National Homeland Security Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE) at the University of Southern California (USC) where he developed the Executive Program in Counter-
-Terrorism and serves as an Adjunct Professor of Homeland Security and Public Policy.

What are the main challenges in dealing with aviation terrorism?

Speaking globally, I think the major challenge is the lack of harmonization of international policies and of security thresholds that have to be met around the world. It appears, going forward, that this is going to improve, but, unfortunately, it is not good enough. We have seen this challenge manifest itself recently with the cargo bombs plot. Prior to the cargo bomb attempts the UK and members of the European Union were pushing back against the TSA because they felt that some of the standards were not practical. So, I believe international cooperation remains a challenge. Secondly, I am a huge proponent of "trusted travel" – biometric identity enhanced programs. I would like to see those technologies and opportunities implemented more globally, because I believe that if we could focus more on the "human element" as opposed to looking for devices and explosives, our efforts could become more intelligence-driven. I think that that these systems will move us toward addressing this challenge. Thus, I think the first main challenge is international policy and the second challenge is process. The third is technology. It appears that whenever we produce or deploy new detection technology, it is always against yesterday's threat. We have to be more forward-thinking about what kinds of explosives are available and the new chemical variations being developed. The desire of some terrorist organizations as it related to attacking the aviation domain is obviously to commit an in-flight incident. I think that is their ultimate goal, whereas they may decide to default to an attack on the ground, near an airport or against the airport itself. Inasmuch as their operational objective is an in-flight incident, we must explore and consider technology that will give us the capability to respond at their next threat.

What do you think the profile of the next aviation terrorists will look like?

I think the next aviation terrorist is likely to be homegrown, regardless of the target location. Demographically, he or she may reflect the dominant population that is in that area, whatever country that may be. We have seen with increasing frequency, particularly since the London bombings, terrorist attacks against transportation infrastructure seem to involve potential attackers who within 20 to 50 miles of the target. If you look at current online Jihadi information, they are suggesting that their actors refrain from traveling internationally and they should obtain as much information as they can from the web. The most efficient operational scenario involves an assailant who is self-recruited and to the extent possible, self-trained. Fortunately, the likelihood of success utilizing this methodology has resulted in several recent operational failures. But I think the future profile is going to be a person possessing familiarity with the target location. I do not think you are going to see imported assailants as we did on 9/11, where a team is smuggled in. Nor, do I think you are going to see a spectacular event, displaying "simultaneity" in terms of the number of target locations, including perhaps several countries, being hit at the same time. I do not know if these organizations have that capacity anymore.

From your experience, what do you think the next modus-operandi will be in aviation terrorism?

In this instance I will use 9/11 as a marker. Aviation and airport security is the most hardened infrastructure since 9/11 – billions of dollars. What this has done is it has forced the adversary become more creative. They have become more adaptive. We have seen an evolution, if you will, in the way they have researched and developed improvised explosive devices designed to pass our layers of security in order to get them on board an aircraft – passenger and cargo. I think we have been successful in moving the target of the center of the target, with the bullseye being the aircraft cockpit. Cockpit doors have been hardened and access procedures revised. Some pilots are armed as part of a Federal Flight Deck Officer Program, Federal Air Marshals accompany many flights and I understand flight crews are being trained to respond to in-flight hostilities. Moving now to the security of the airport, a variety of detection technology, some seen and some unseen has been installed, there are increasing numbers of explosive detection canine teams, Behavioral Detection Officers and many other systems. As a result, with the passage of time and the terrorists' continued focus on the aviation domain, we may see more Glasgow-type plots, inasmuch as the attacker has to default to consider attacking the facility. The question is – does an attack of this nature have the same kind of economic impact on the system? I believe most airports are more resilient. With all due respect to the potential loss of life, and I am not trying to be insensitive, but if airports were to experience an attack, most would respond and recover quickly, as Glasgow was able to do. Unfortunately we have seen a ripple in the system with the experience of non-events, such as the liquid bomb plot of 2006. Nothing happened, but the response resulted in the loss of $65 million dollars in losses due to cancelled and delayed flights by British Airlines Ryanair also attempted to sue the UK for 565 million

dollars in delays and cancellations. So you can clearly see that when there was no loss of life and no injuries, the economic impact was still significant. If you believe al-Qaeda propaganda of attempting to hemorrhage the aviation system, then they have reached a desired end-state without actually executing a successful attack.

The last question now on aviation security – is the security we experience at airports effective in countering aviation terrorism or does the bulk of counter-terrorism in aviation stem from other sources?

I believe that we can do a better job. One of the challenges we have is that the public does not understand that counter-terrorism is a risk-management proposition. We will never eliminate the threat. That is something I think particularly people in the West have difficulty with. You do a much better job of comprehending that reality here [in Israel]. You understand a terror attack may occur; you do everything you can to prevent it, detect it, and deter it; but if it does happen, you respond and recover quickly. The West seems to associate investment in counter-terrorism as an achievement of eliminating the threat. Since we billions of dollars, an attack should not happen. There is an education process in our country that is clearly missing. In terms of effectiveness, I think that the only way that aviation security is going to become more effective and efficient, is when people who use the system become part of it. People need to understand what the real threats are – and we do not need to reveal classified or confidential information to do that – what our capabilities are, what kinds of things they (the public) can do to help us, and, at the end of the day, they can enjoy the flight. When we experience actions like the planned opt-out protests in response to the advanced imaging technology and pat-down procedures being implemented, I think that is the one of the worst possible scenarios – when the users of system push back against it because they have not been educated and engaged and as a result believe the process is essentially ineffective.

Do I see the bulk of counter-terrorism in aviation stemming from other sources? I think that there are a number of things that we are doing to protecting critical infrastructure, other transportation modalities, and even soft targets that we might be able to transition to the aviation domain without disrupting the flow.

What do you see as the next terror threat to the United States: homegrown cells or Al Qaeda's core?

Terror threats to the United States – I want to begin by saying this: to me, terrorism is terrorism. I know that that the term conjures up different images amongst diverse groups. However, as a society the challenge is one of reducing the risk of violent extremism. It takes three things for a terrorist incident to occur –an alienated individual, a legitimizing ideology and a complicit society. It is that society that we can affect the most. Engaging those societies being targeted by these organizations or groups, should remain a priority. It is an important element in decreasing the opportunity for the homegrown threat to develop. It is noteworthy that we are seeing homegrown self-recruited individuals locking on to or embracing, or at least acknowledging people like Anwar al-Awlaki. This individual appears to have

achieved significant traction in terms of networked Jihad. It has been determined he was an influence to some of the 9/11 attackers. During the past 18 months, his name has been mentioned by suspects in thwarted plots from around the world, having admitted to reading his speeches, sermons or instructions online. That is disturbing. So if I were going to say the threat might have an Al Qaeda core, there is a strong possibility of a nexus to al-Awlaki's ideology.

If you could give one piece of advice to decision makers regarding security and counter-terrorism, what would it be?

The one piece of advice to decision makers I would make would involve education. I think those societies that fare well, in terms of societal resilience – Israel, the UK, and Ireland – have populations that understand what the threat is, what is being done about it, and how they can participate. Education – and I do not say it because of my role as a professor, I say it because terrorism is based on fear. People fear what they don't understand. Those citizens who enjoy life day-to-day life aware of the threat as you do here, understanding that, as it says in Dr. Ganor's office, "There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it!"