International Cruise Victims

How Vulnerable is the Cruise Industry to an act of terrorism?

It happened in San Bernardino, Colorado Springs, and Paris. But what if terrorists decided to strike at sea?

On any given day, cruise ships packed with thousands of passengers are plying the open ocean or calling at ports all over the globe. Given the recent uptick in violence, how vulnerable is the cruise industry to an act of terrorism?

It seems that no target, big or small, is off the terrorists' list of possibilities, as long as the attacks produce mass casualties and provide shock value. Airports, jetliners, skyscrapers, embassy buildings and entire cities have been attacked with such regularity that they differ only in the terrorist groups responsible for the mayhem.

The terrorists tactics and their motives, however, are not new and have been used for decades against both military and civilian targets by such groups as ISIS, al-Qaida, the Palestine Liberation Organization, Hamas and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah. Using automatic weapons and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), these terrorists are motivated by one sole purpose: to kill as many innocents as possible.

Cruise lines are a target

The fact is that cruise ships have always been targets of terrorist plots, both at sea and on shore.

An important consideration is the increased probability in the terrorist's strategy that the cruise ship passengers will be of Judeo-Christian faiths, the primary targets of the jihad agenda, without risking wider Muslim interests.

Most famously, in 1986 the *Achille Lauro*, a passenger ship, was seized by a group of four Palestine Liberation Front terrorists as the ship left port in Alexandria, Egypt. The terrorists were able to smuggle machine guns,

pistols and grenades in checked luggage, and easily boarded the ship using forged documents.

The terrorists singled out American and Jewish passengers. They later were able to disable the ship's transponder and sailed anonymously around the eastern Mediterranean. An international negotiating effort ended the odyssey of the hijacked ship, but not before one Jewish American passenger was summarily executed by the terrorists and his wheelchair-bound body was dumped overboard.

In 2015, Islamic terrorists inspired by a Tunisian nationalist group attacked cruise ship passengers as they stepped off excursion buses at the Bardo museum in Tunis, Tunisia, killing 19 people.

Tip of the iceberg

Probably lesser known, but equally significant, was a plot in 2005 by al-Qaida inspired terrorists to attack Israeli cruise ships bound for Turkey. Their plan was to attach explosives to underwater scuba scooters to ram the cruise ships. Fortunately, reliable intelligence information alerted the cruise ships of a possible threat and they diverted their port call from Turkey to Cyprus.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, al-Qaida had plans to attack the most famous of cruise ships, the Queen Mary 2, as she transited the Mediterranean. The plan was foiled only after the U.S. captured Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, the al-Qaida mastermind behind the plot.

The cruise industry likes to boast of its safety record, and regularly repeats its mantra that safety is their number one priority. Regardless of whether this is really true, it does not make the industry any less at risk from the ongoing scourge of Islamic jihadists, or even the threat from maritime pirates.

Is the cruise industry ready?

This begs the question: Are cruise ships and their security operations adequately prepared to respond to and, more importantly, prevent such acts?

The simple answer the cruise industry would like you to believe is: yes.

But the underlying truth is that even with a surge in pirate attacks and worldwide terror threats on the rise, the cruise industry has not altered its security paradigm in any significant way. Instead, the cruise lines have opted for selective avoidance of ports and oceans known to be at risk.

Unfortunately, the number of safe destinations and ports of call, especially in the Mediterranean, have begun to shrink as the threats increased. If cruise ships really are potential targets for terrorist plots, is there something

more that should be done to protect them?

Taking precautions

The obvious idea to arm security crews onboard cruise ships was given consideration after the wave of pirate attacks in the Indian Ocean. The consensus among the cruise industry at the time was not to arm security crews on board ships. One major European line, however, favored the idea because one of their ships came under armed attack by pirates in the Gulf of Aden. Passengers allegedly threw deck chairs at the pirates as they tried to climb onto the ship from their small boats.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) emphatically stated they were not in favor of arming any ships passing through pirate waters, fearing running gun battles on the high seas. Piracy, as far as the cruise industry was concerned, after all, was a matter for the international anti-piracy patrols (which included the U.S. Navy) operating off the coast of Somalia and in the Western Indian Ocean.

Soon, however, especially after the seizing of the *Maersk Alabama* in 2009, a growth industry of armed maritime mercenaries trained to repel pirate attacks, began servicing ships transiting these waters. This has seemed to stem the tide of piracy for now.

Terrorism is different

Terrorism is quite another matter when it comes to protecting cruise ships. It is impractical to safeguard cruise ships against terrorism the way ships are typically protected against pirates.

Although some anti-piracy measures may work to prevent some terrorist plots in port and at sea — like engaging fire hoses, using pirate screens (barriers designed to prevent intruders from accessing the ship's open lower decks) — the omnipresent threat of terrorism makes arming the crew impractical.

Maritime terrorist attacks have historically included bombings such as the attack in 2004 by the Abu Sayyaf guerrilla group on *Superferry 14* in the Philippines. 116 persons died after a small IED placed by a terrorist exploded and started a fire which capsized the ship.

With the creation of the 2004 International Ship and Port Security (ISPS) Code in place, it is unlikely that terrorists could smuggle arms or explosives aboard a ship the way the *Achille Lauro* hijackers did in 1986.

However, while the ISPS Code only prescribes minimum security standards which must be met, cruise operators can claim they are doing everything required by international law to combat both piracy and terrorism. This lets

the cruise industry off the hook, so to speak.

When cruise lines are asked about security, their standard answer is that "to protect their security operations, cruise lines cannot discuss any security measures." This answer is usually a euphemism to mean categorically *no,* especially in regards to arming their crews.

In reality, cruise ship security personnel most likely do not carry anything more than pepper spray. Security crews on cruise ships are generally private security guards, trained only to break up occasional bar fights, check IDs, and screen passengers at the gangways with metal detectors.

What they should do

If the cruise lines are serious about combating terrorism, they should immediately consider arming their security crews or supplementing their security staffs with professional armed security personnel. They should also proudly boast this fact to the public and put the terrorists on notice.

It is highly unlikely that the industry would ever consider doing this. The sight of armed security guards on ships would cause some passengers to question their personal safety while on a holiday cruise.

That's not to say they are doing nothing; quite the contrary.

The ISPS Code notwithstanding, some cruise lines have engaged in a wide range of anti-terrorism measures, short of weapons. Some measures like the Long Range Acoustic Device are already responsible for thwarting a pirate attack against the Seabourn *Spirit* in 2005. However, this device is not universally carried by all cruise ships, and would have limited value against a terrorist attack, especially one employing drones, underwater scooters packed with explosives, suicide bombers, or chemical or biological weapons.

The idea of placing the equivalent of air marshals on cruise ships has been brought up from time to time in response to the threat of terrorism, and is currently under consideration in a maritime security bill before Congress.

Cruise passengers would be relieved to know that, at least in U.S. ports since 9/11, the U.S. Coast Guard has placed temporary "sea marshals" on vessels which are deemed to be at risk from terrorism that are entering and leaving U.S. ports. This includes cruise ships.

Armed Coast Guard personnel on ships are a highly visible deterrent against any hijacking-type scenarios inside the harbor boundaries. Out at sea, away from the protection of the port's ISPS measures and response capabilities of the Coast Guard, cruise ships are on their own. This is exactly where the terrorists, at least in previous examples, have planned everything from food poisoning to kamikaze-style suicide attacks.

A two-tiered strategy

From these examples, it seems that the most effective approach for the cruise industry to prepare itself against terrorism is to employ a two-tiered strategy. First, they should increase visible security on ships with an armed law enforcement presence like sea marshals. Behind the scenes, they should increase efforts to gain access to credible threat information targeting cruise ships and the ports they visit.

As recent events have proven, the terrorists' ability to plan and swiftly carry out attacks against "soft targets" will continue. While maritime pirates seek to capture a ship and crew and hold them for ransom, terrorists only want total destruction and death.

The terrorists perceive that with just a little ingenuity and secrecy, they can succeed in killing scores of people in a single act. Unless more stringent deterrence is enacted in the cruise industry, the possibility of a serious attack against a cruise ship or port facility can't be discounted.

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