



Testimony
Before the Subcommittee on
Transportation and Protective Security,
Committee on Homeland Security,
House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 10:00 a.m. ET
Tuesday, September 26, 2017

AVIATION SECURITY

TSA's Efforts to Assess Foreign Airports and Inspect Air Carriers

Statement of Jennifer Grover, Director, Homeland
Security and Justice

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-808T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation and Protective Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Approximately 300 foreign airports offer last point of departure flights to the United States. TSA is the federal agency with primary responsibility for securing the nation's civil aviation system and assesses foreign airports and inspects air carriers to ensure they have effective security measures in place. While TSA is authorized under U.S. law to conduct foreign airport assessments, it does not have authority to impose or otherwise enforce security requirements at foreign airports. In contrast, TSA does have authority to impose and enforce requirements on air carriers.

This statement summarizes key preliminary findings from GAO's draft report on (1) steps TSA has taken to enhance foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections since 2011 and (2) steps TSA takes to address any deficiencies identified during foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections. To develop the draft report, GAO reviewed TSA program data, interviewed TSA officials, and conducted site visits to TSA field locations that manage foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections.

What GAO Recommends

GAO's draft report, which is with TSA for comment, includes two recommendations to strengthen TSA's data management.

View [GAO-17-808T](#). For more information, contact Jennifer Grover at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov.

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AVIATION SECURITY

TSA's Efforts to Assess Foreign Airports and Inspect Air Carriers

What GAO Found

GAO's preliminary analysis showed that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken steps to enhance its foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections since 2011, including aligning program resources based on risk, resolving airport access issues, making evaluations more comprehensive, and creating operational efficiencies. For example, TSA has implemented targeted foreign airport assessments in appropriate locations based on risk; begun primarily assessing airports in Europe through joint assessments with the European Commission; and developed the Global Risk Analysis and Decision Support System to streamline the assessment report writing process and strengthen data analysis capabilities, among other actions.

GAO's preliminary analysis also found that TSA assists foreign airports in addressing identified security deficiencies through various types of capacity development efforts, such as on-the-spot counseling and consultation, and training and technical assistance. TSA also assists air carriers in addressing identified security deficiencies through on-the-spot counseling as well as providing clarification regarding TSA security requirements when necessary.

Further, TSA has taken a number of steps to strengthen its analytical processes and better understand the impact of the foreign airport assessment and air carrier inspection programs. Specifically, TSA conducts regional strategy meetings in which officials examine trend data for airport assessment and air carrier inspection results, identify common areas of non-compliance, and develop capacity building approaches customized for particular regions of the world. TSA also produces regional risk reports, which are meant to provide TSA personnel with an understanding of known vulnerabilities by region in order to inform mitigation planning efforts.

While TSA has taken steps to strengthen its analytical processes, among other things, GAO's preliminary analysis showed that TSA lacks key information for decision making. Specifically, TSA's database for tracking the resolution status of security deficiencies does not have comprehensive data on security deficiencies' root causes and corrective actions. For example, GAO found that 70 percent of fiscal year 2016 records in TSA's database exhibited empty fields pertaining to root cause or recommended corrective action. In addition, the database does not have a field to categorize specific root causes. For example, while it captures three broad categories of root causes—lack of knowledge, lack of infrastructure, and lack of will—it does not capture 12 subcategories (e.g., supervision) that would better explain the root causes of particular security deficiencies. By fully collecting data and improving the categorization of root causes, TSA would be better positioned to assure that corrective actions accurately address the specific, underlying reasons for security vulnerabilities.

Chairman Katko, Ranking Member Watson Coleman, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity today to discuss our work examining the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) foreign airport assessment and air carrier inspection programs. We are conducting this work in response to a provision in the Aviation Security Act of 2016.¹

Civil aviation, including U.S.-bound flights, remains a target of coordinated terrorist activity. The threat has become more diverse as adversaries develop new tactics to attack the aviation system. With approximately 300 airports in foreign countries offering last point of departure flights to the United States, TSA's efforts to evaluate the security of foreign airports and air carriers that service the United States—and mitigating any identified security risks—are of vital importance in ensuring the security of the aviation system.

This statement is based on a draft report, the sensitive version of which is currently with TSA for comment.² This testimony discusses key preliminary findings from that report on (1) the steps TSA has taken to enhance foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections since 2011 and (2) the steps TSA takes to address any deficiencies identified during foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections. In addition to these objectives, our forthcoming sensitive report will describe the results of TSA's foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections. We also plan to issue a public version of that report.

To address these objectives, we reviewed TSA documents, including its 2016 Foreign Airport Assessment Program Standard Operating Procedures (FAAP SOP). In addition, we interviewed senior TSA officials, inspectors, and country and industry liaisons located at TSA headquarters and in the field. We also interviewed other stakeholders, such as officials with the Department of State (State) and the European Commission (EC)

¹See Pub. L. No. 114-190, tit. III, § 3202(b), 130 Stat. 615, 652 (2016). The Aviation Security Act was enacted on July 15, 2016 as title III of the FAA Extension, Safety, and Security Act of 2016.

²We shared the information in this statement with TSA for a sensitivity review and to obtain its views. TSA officials provided us with technical comments, which we have incorporated as appropriate, and determined that the statement contains no sensitive information.

to discuss efforts these organizations have in place to enhance international aviation security and their experiences coordinating with TSA. We accompanied a team of TSA inspectors during an air carrier inspection at an airport in Europe and we spoke with airport officials and representatives from two air carriers at a separate European airport. We based our site selection on several factors, including the air carrier locations TSA had plans to inspect during the course of our audit work and host government willingness to allow us to accompany TSA. Finally, we compared TSA's efforts to leverage information for capacity development to the FAAP SOP and criteria for obtaining and processing information in federal internal control standards.³

The work upon which this statement is based is being conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Enacted shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA) established TSA and gave the agency responsibility for securing all modes of transportation, including the nation's civil aviation system.⁴ Consistent with ATSA and in accordance with existing statutory requirements, TSA is to assess the effectiveness of security measures at foreign airports (1) served by a U.S. air carrier, (2) from which a foreign air carrier serves the United States, (3) that pose a high risk of introducing danger to international air travel,

³GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

⁴See Pub. L. No. 107-71, 115 Stat. 597 (2001); 49 U.S.C. § 114. For purposes of this statement, U.S.-flagged air carriers are air carrier operations regulated in accordance with 49 C.F.R. part 1544 and are referred to as "U.S. air carriers" or "domestic air carriers," and foreign-flagged air carriers are air carrier operations regulated in accordance with 49 C.F.R. part 1546 and are referred to as "foreign air carriers."

and (4) that are otherwise deemed appropriate by the Secretary of Homeland Security.⁵

TSA assesses the effectiveness of security measures at foreign airports using select aviation security standards and recommended practices adopted by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a United Nations organization representing 191 member countries.⁶ In addition, TSA is to conduct inspections of U.S. air carriers and foreign air carriers servicing the United States from foreign airports in order to ensure that they meet applicable security requirements, including those set forth in an air carrier's TSA-approved security program.⁷

In 2007, we recommended that TSA take steps to improve oversight of its foreign airport assessment and air carrier inspection programs.⁸ In 2011, we reported on TSA's efforts to assess the security at foreign airports and made several recommendations to enhance program efficiency and effectiveness, among other things.⁹ Specifically, we recommended that TSA (1) develop a mechanism for trend analysis, (2) establish criteria and guidance to help decision makers with vulnerability ratings, and (3) consider the feasibility of conducting more targeted foreign airport assessments and compiling best practices. DHS concurred with the three recommendations and has since taken several actions to address them

⁵49 U.S.C. § 44907. Prior to the establishment of DHS in March 2003, authority for conducting foreign airport assessments resided with the Secretary of Transportation and was carried out by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). TSA assumed responsibility for conducting the assessments following the enactment of ATSA (enacted Nov. 19, 2001). In March 2003, TSA transferred from the Department of Transportation to DHS in accordance with the Homeland Security Act of 2002. See Pub. L. No. 107-296, § 403(2), 116 Stat. 2135, 2178 (2002).

⁶See 49 U.S.C. § 44907(a)(2)(C). ICAO has a primary objective to provide for the safe, orderly, and efficient development of international civil aviation.

⁷In general, domestic and foreign air carriers that operate to, from, or within the United States must establish and maintain security programs approved by TSA in accordance with requirements set forth in regulation at 49 C.F.R. parts 1544 (domestic air carriers) and 1546 (foreign air carriers). See 49 U.S.C §§ 44903(c), 44906; 49 C.F.R. §§ 1544.3, 1544.101-1544.105, 1546.3, 1546.101-1546.105.

⁸GAO, *Aviation Security: Foreign Airport Assessments and Air Carrier Inspections Help Enhance Security, but Oversight of These Efforts Can Be Strengthened*, [GAO-07-729](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2007).

⁹GAO, *Aviation Security: TSA Has Taken Steps to Enhance its Foreign Airport Assessments, but Opportunities Exist to Strengthen the Program*, [GAO-12-163](#) (Washington, D.C.: October 21, 2011).

all, including developing a mechanism to compile and analyze best practices.

Since 2011, TSA Has Taken Various Steps to Strengthen its Foreign Airport Assessment and Air Carrier Inspection Programs

Our preliminary analysis showed that, since 2011, TSA has taken various steps to strengthen its foreign airport assessment and air carrier inspection programs. For instance, TSA has taken steps to:

- **Better target program resources based on risk.** For example, based on a recommendation in our 2011 report, TSA has taken actions to conduct more targeted foreign airport assessments. Specifically, TSA developed the Pre-Visit Questionnaire, which foreign airport officials fill out prior to TSA's visit. This information enables each TSA foreign airport assessment team to tailor the on-site assessment at each airport and focus TSA's assessment efforts on specific areas of concern. TSA also implemented more focused airport assessments, known as targeted risk assessments, in locations where risk is high or there are other factors that require a more focused evaluation of the site's security posture.
- **Strengthen foreign airport access and the comprehensiveness of its airport and air carrier evaluations.** For instance, according to TSA officials, the agency has used several tactics to resolve access issues and overcome delays with scheduling foreign airport visits at certain locations, including deploying the same inspectors over multiple assessments to build rapport with foreign airport officials. Furthermore, since our 2011 review, TSA has begun primarily assessing airports in Europe through joint assessments with the EC.¹⁰ TSA officials we met with indicated that TSA's strong relationship with the EC has afforded the agency excellent access to foreign airports in Europe and a better understanding of vulnerabilities at these locations, which has resulted in more comprehensive assessments.
- **Create operational efficiencies.** For instance, TSA developed the Global Risk Analysis and Decision Support System (GRADS) to

¹⁰The EC is the executive body of the European Union and is responsible for proposing legislation, implementing decisions, upholding the Union's treaties, and the general day-to-day running of the Union.

streamline the assessment report writing process and strengthen the agency's data analysis capabilities of its foreign airport assessment results. According to TSA officials, GRADS has provided agency personnel with a number of benefits, including the ability to run standardized reports, extract and analyze key data, and manage airport operational information, such as data on security screening equipment.

TSA Addresses Security Deficiencies through Various Capacity Development Efforts, but Data Management Challenges Exist

TSA Assistance to Foreign Airports and Air Carriers

Our preliminary analysis showed that TSA assists foreign airports in addressing identified security deficiencies in various ways. For instance, inspectors transfer knowledge on how to mitigate identified airport security deficiencies to foreign airport officials. According to TSA officials, inspectors typically offer on-the-spot counseling during airport assessments when they discover deficiencies, usually of an infrequent, less serious, or technical nature, that can be addressed immediately. To address deeper problems with staff security knowledge or to strengthen staff knowledge in an evolving threat environment, TSA may provide training, such as traditional classroom courses or interactive workshops, to foreign airport staff. TSA also assists foreign governments in securing technical assistance and consultation provided by TSA and other U.S. and foreign government agencies to help improve security at foreign airports, particularly after security incidents or at airports in developing countries.

TSA also takes steps, such as on-the-spot counseling, to help air carriers address security deficiencies identified during air carrier inspections. According to TSA, since carriers have TSA-approved security programs, additional training may not be necessary to correct small issues. Rather, officials said that counseling air carrier staff on the proper procedures and follow up observations of them practicing the procedures may suffice. In addition, TSA assigns liaisons to counsel air carriers and provide clarification regarding TSA security requirements when necessary.

Leveraging Information and Enhancing Data Management

Our preliminary analysis indicated that, since our 2011 report, TSA has taken a number of steps to strengthen its analytical processes and better understand the impact of the foreign airport assessment and air carrier inspection programs. Specifically, TSA now conducts regional strategy meetings in which officials examine trend data for airport assessments and air carrier inspections, identify common areas of non-compliance, and develop capacity building approaches customized to one of four regions: Africa-Middle East, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Western Hemisphere. TSA also produces regional risk reports, which are meant to provide TSA personnel operating within each of the four regions with an understanding of known vulnerabilities in the region in order to inform mitigation planning efforts.

While TSA has taken steps to leverage the results of foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections to monitor system-wide vulnerabilities and inform capacity development, our preliminary analysis showed that TSA lacks key information for decision making. For instance, TSA's database for tracking the resolution status of identified foreign airport deficiencies has gaps and its system for categorization does not result in sufficient specificity of information related to security deficiencies' root causes and corrective actions.

Root causes represent the underlying reason why an airport is not meeting security standards and, according to TSA documentation, fall into three general categories: lack of knowledge, lack of infrastructure, and lack of will. Corrective actions are efforts to mitigate security deficiencies and might include training and other capacity building efforts. According to TSA, a thorough understanding of the underlying reasons for each deficiency is critical to selecting the appropriate mitigation activities. However, we found that 70 percent of fiscal year 2016 records in TSA's database exhibited empty fields pertaining to root cause or recommended corrective action. TSA officials indicated that the agency began requiring staff to record root cause and corrective action information in 2015 and that institutionalizing this requirement to facilitate consistent data entry will take time. Having complete data on root causes and corrective actions would help TSA systematically monitor airport performance in addressing deficiencies and leverage information for decision making regarding capacity development.

We also found that the same database has limitations related to the categorization of root causes and corrective actions. TSA procedures indicate that root causes may relate to three broad categories, as explained earlier, and 12 subcategories: aviation security infrastructure, communication, cultural factors, human factors, management systems, physical infrastructure, procedures, quality control, resources, supervision, technology, and training. However, the database does not include a field to categorize root causes according to these subcategories or other more specific areas. As a result, it does not capture more granular information that would better explain the specific root cause of an identified security issue. Moreover, information on recommended corrective actions is stored entirely in narrative fields and, therefore, is difficult to analyze without manual intervention.

TSA staff stated that they recognize that the classification of data currently contained in the database could be improved, but that they have not had an opportunity to address the issues because they have been focused on developing the newest release of GRADS. TSA staff also indicated that they are exploring opportunities to better classify data in future releases of GRADS. However, according to TSA procedures, a thorough understanding of the underlying reasons for each deficiency is critical to properly selecting the appropriate mitigation activities. By classifying information on root causes and corrective actions with additional specificity, TSA would be better positioned to assure that corrective actions accurately address the specific, underlying reasons for security vulnerabilities. Our draft report includes two recommendations to TSA to strengthen data management.

Chairman Katko, Ranking Member Watson Coleman, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff members have any questions about this testimony, please contact Jennifer Grover, Director, Homeland Security and Justice at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this testimony included Jessica Farb (Director), Jason Bair and Chris Ferencik (Assistant Directors), Anthony C. Fernandez (Analyst-in-Charge), and Jesse Elrod. Technical support was provided by Tom Lombardi, Jeremy Manion, and Amanda Miller.

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