Securing U.S. Hotels in the Age of Terrorism

The Hoteliers' Perspective

Executive Summary & Presentation

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Executive Summary

While terrorist attacks perpetrated on or at hotels are not uncommon globally, the United States had been largely unaffected by this trend until the Route 91 Music Festival shooting in Las Vegas in October 2017. For this reason, domestic hotels have not taken the same precautions to prevent attacks that are found more commonly in hotels in other regions of the world. Severe security measures previously would have been perceived as overly cautious and costly to hotel management in the United States, however, this incident showed that U.S. hotels are not free from the risk of terrorism. It heightened awareness that flaws and weaknesses exist in the current standard security policies of U.S. hotels, which can be exploited by people looking to do major harm to guests and other innocent people.

In U.S. hotels, the lack of baseline standards for security leave hotels with little guidance on how to best protect their guests, employees and properties from the risk of terror. As a result, the security policies in hotels countrywide are insufficient to deter or combat terrorist attacks on properties, especially when considering current trends in terrorism. There are numerous reasons why hotels make attractive targets for attacks of this type, like the openness, high potential for casualties, and general lack of security, among others. When these reasons are considered alongside the trends in terrorism, which include an increase in attacks in Western Countries, a shift toward soft targets like hotels, and the growing number of lone-actor attacks, especially in the United States, it indicates that U.S. hotels face a real risk of subsequent attacks, and that the threat of terrorism should be a serious concern for hotel properties.

Should terrorism become an active and recurrent problem in U.S. hotels, it would result in guest fear and hesitation surrounding staying in hotels, and liability issues and lawsuits for the properties, which both have the potential to hurt a hotel's bottom line. Because of this, it is imperative that hotels reassess their security practices and protocol in the aftermath of the Las Vegas shooting to ensure they are keeping their guests and employees safe from a similar attack.

After examining the current security practices in hotel properties in the U.S., it became clear that the current security standards in hotels in the United States are not sufficient to deter or prevent a violent terrorist attack, primarily because there are no set standards, thus security policy and implemented measures can vary greatly from one property to the next. Weaknesses in hotel security were illuminated through this examination, many of which overlap with the reasons why hotels are attractive targets for acts of terror, and revolve around the open and accessible nature of hotels. The majority of security weaknesses in hotels, however, stem from the property trying to balance security with guest privacy, convenience and satisfaction, and cost.

In the aftermath of the Las Vegas shooting, as the public considers whether the hotel and its security policies played a part in this tragedy, and wonders if the same issues exist in other properties resulting in a risk for similar attacks, hoteliers must examine their own policies and identify their weaknesses in order to relieve the public's fears, and lessen their own risk. As such, this study set out to explore how hotels have responded to the tragedy in Las Vegas, and how concerned U.S. hoteliers are about the risk of terrorism on their properties after that incident. Additionally, it aimed to investigate what hoteliers view as their properties' biggest weaknesses in security and what hesitations exist when it comes to implementing new security measures on property, as well as to discover what they, as people with first-hand knowledge of the industry, believe would be feasible and effective security measures to combat the risk of terrorism. The survey consisted of 19 questions, and was distributed via email to a sample of approximately 90 hotel employees of managerial level or above, and 24 complete and usable responses were received.

The results are explained in detail in the study, but some of the key takeaways are explained in detail here. Through this study, it has become evident that hoteliers are aware of the risk of terrorism to varying degrees, especially after the shooting in Las Vegas, and of the weaknesses within hotel security, as they were able to identify many in their responses. But, it seems that these hoteliers and their properties still are not taking many steps to improve upon these weaknesses for fear of inconveniencing, alienating, or displeasing their guests. They don't want to lose business as a result of these guest impacts, so they hold off on implementing. However, if the terrorism trends that indicate an increasing risk of terror on hotels in the U.S. prove true, hotels may put off implementing necessary security changes for too long, allowing, through their inaction, another incident like the Las Vegas shooting to occur. Right now the urgency is high, and the need for increased security is clear because the shooting was so recent, but the more time that passes, the more likely hotels are to move on from the topic of security to other concerns, until the next tragic attack happens bringing the issue to the forefront once again. The problem is that the next time will not be the first time, it will not be a new shock. Instead the public will wonder why hotels did not take any steps to keep it from happening again; why they did not do anything to protect their patrons?

Also in the course of this research, it has become apparent that physical security upgrades, despite being among the most frequently suggested courses of action, are unlikely to be implemented until events like the shooting in Las Vegas become more prevalent in the United States. After only one such event, the measures and their associated cost and guest impact are still deemed too extreme for the perceived threat level. However, if subsequent attacks were to happen, illustrating that the Vegas shooting was not an anomaly or outlier event, but actually part of a bigger trend, then the need for these more extreme measures would become obvious, and they would be much more likely to be implemented by hotels and accepted by guests.

Additionally, it became overwhelmingly clear that a lack of consistency exists across U.S. hotel properties in both their perception of terrorism as a risk, and the security policies and practices in place to protect guests and employees. It is important for hotel properties to stay abreast of the changing trends in terrorism, such as attack type and ideal targets, in order to understand their own risk or vulnerability to attack and maintain a level of security that is appropriate to handle or mitigate that risk.

Recommendations

In order to mitigate the risk of terror on hotel properties and to lessen the inconsistencies between security practices and policies on hotel properties, an industry standard, a set of guidelines and suggestions of security practices and policies for the industry as a whole, should be created and implemented industry wide in order to keep security more uniform across U.S. hotel properties. This would best be done by a committee consisting of representatives from all the major hotel companies, the American Hotel & Lodging Association, local or federal level law enforcement, and others from the security, hospitality, and technology fields. They could come together and collaborate to determine the most practical security measures, measures that are effective but not overly costly or bothersome to guests, to be passed down to the individual properties to implement. This committee of representatives would work better than an outside entity, because the representatives from each company can ensure that the guidelines get passed on to their properties and implemented as a requirement from corporate.

The guide would consist of the baseline level of security suggestions that would secure an average hotel. It would specify appropriate security practices such as the ideal staffing levels for securing a hotel property based on size, and the most effective security training techniques, schedules, and frequencies, with approved security training plans included. It would also suggest physical and technological security measures like elevators that require key cards, security cameras, up to date door lock technology, and limited entrance points to the property that can all be monitored. These guidelines and more would make up the security protocols, policy and practices, that would then be considered the standard. Because different hotel properties have different risk levels, the standard would also include suggested modifiers for higher level targets, like urban hotels in tourist destinations- New York City, Washington D.C., or Las Vegas, and lower level targets, like smaller suburban properties in areas with less tourist traffic. These modified suggestions might ask that higher level targets consider having armed security on premises, or that lower level targets may not require as high a security presence on site at all times.

This same committee could also take on the task of monitoring and tracking attacks on hotels in the U.S. and distributing that information to hotels properties. This would better allow the industry to stay abreast of terrorism trends, to stay informed of the risk, and to maintain a security level that is appropriate for the changing threat level

and techniques of attackers. This information should be considered during the creation of the committee's standard security guidelines.

Another recommendation would be for the industry to undertake a study of the guests' perceptions of hotel security in the United States. If the guest impact and perception is the most important factor causing hesitation when considering increased security, hotels or industry organizations should take the time and initiative to ask guests how new measures would be received, or what security they would like to see implemented in hotels. This could also be done by the committee, as they could put together surveys to be distributed to guests through their hotel properties and brand systems. They could ask about the guest perception of hotel security levels, what they look for in a hotel as far as security is concerned, their thoughts on various different security measures, and even if they'd be willing to pay a slightly higher room rate to offset the cost of increased security at hotels. They could then use this information to further flush out their standards, and use the data gathered to support their security plan.

The last recommendation would be in regards to the training of the hotel employees. Because training activities- frequency, content and quality- seem the most likely and immediate change to occur to hotel security, programs should take a less traditional format than is normal. A classroom setting may be appropriate for training mass groups of employees about other things within the hotel, but security training in that setting does nothing to help in the event of an actual emergency. Security training should take the form of role-plays or drills, conducted in small groups, possibly by department, so that instead of a big group being talked to about the general hotel wide emergency plan with no idea of how to practically apply or execute it during a real situation, individual departments can run through an actual scenario. This would allow the employees in each department to see what their collective responsibilities as a department would be in an emergency situation, as well as what their individual roles would be, and how best to execute those in a high stress environment. Without specifying individual roles and responsibilities during an emergency, in a situation where it actually matters, employees will all look to someone else to act, and no one ever actually will. Without learning this practical application, and running through a situation in a role-play or active shooter drill, all of the classroom training will immediately be forgotten in the face of an actual emergency.