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The Terrorist Identifications Datamart Environment (TIDE): What would be the effect on US airports' security checkpoints of automatically designating all persons listed in TIDE for high security screening?

After the attempted bombing of Northwest Flight 253, federal officials were quoted to the effect that the perpetrator, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, had previously been entered in TIDE, the National Counterterrorism Center's global list of persons known or suspected to have connections to terrorism. Despite his inclusion in TIDE, Abdul Mutallab was not designated for additional physical screening prior to boarding Flight 253 at Amsterdam because, according to officials, TIDE listed some 550,000 persons and this large population made it impractical or impossible to use as a basis for designating airline passengers for intensive preboard screening. However, that judgment may have been faulty. On reflection, it seems that adding 550,000 persons to those designated (by other categorization systems, such as Secure Flight) for high security screening would not overburden checkpoint capacities, for the following reasons:

According to the TSA, about 1.5 million passengers are screened daily at airport checkpoints in the United States. We do not know what proportion of those is selected by Secure Flight for additional, more intensive screening, but we will assume it is 1%. That would generate 15,000 "normal" selectees per day, spread unevenly over the 400 airports at which preboard screening is conducted, and also spread over the typical 16 hours of daily checkpoint operation. The effect of adding any person listed in TIDE to the selectees would not have an unbearable effect, for the following reasons:

- Very few would be flying at any particular time. If 10% flew on a given day, it would mean that on average, each person was taking ~36 flights per year. A more reasonable number would be 1%. Even this fraction is still a high assumption because many will rarely or never fly, but we will use it.
- TIDE is a global listing. If we assume that 40% of the total reside inside the United States and 1% fly on any given day, there will be 2200 ($550,000 \times 0.4 \times 0.01$) additional TIDE passengers per day on flights within and from the United States, or a 14% increase of selectees nationwide. Given that the addition would be spread over the screening day, it seems unlikely that it would cause overload of high security screening lanes.

The foregoing analysis and its optimistic conclusions could be quite inaccurate, if TIDE has a significant problem of similar or identical names causing false selection of passengers. In time, however, the use of additional distinguishing data, such as gender and date of birth, could reduce the false selections. Another consideration is that the 550,000 listed persons may include many who indeed have associations with terrorism, but are in no way hostile toward the United States. Again over time, the TIDE list should be combed to provide a shorter, more soundly based list for aviation security purposes. Lastly, any of the 550,000 who are placed on no-fly lists would not be screened.