

# Leaked document exposes repressive character of US airport screenings

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On Friday, the *Intercept* published a leaked document outlining the criteria used by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to flag airline travelers for interrogation and possible detention as terror suspects. The document makes clear that the TSA's screening program has nothing to do with its nominal purpose of keeping travelers "safe," but is in fact a pretense for arbitrary searches and interrogations.

The document reveals that the TSA's airport screening program, known as Screening Passengers by Observation Techniques (SPOT), flags a range of behaviors broad enough to justify the interrogation of almost any traveler. These include: late arrival, sweatiness, a "powerful" grip on one's luggage, keeping a close eye on the time, "inappropriate" talkativeness, having recently shaved, or "excessive fidgeting."

Beyond these highly arbitrary indicators, the referral sheet includes a number of criteria that appear entirely aimed at punishing those who show opposition or frustration to the TSA's screening procedures. Travelers are flagged if they display "arrogance and verbally express contempt for the screening process," maintain a "rigid posture," or show an "unusual interest in security officers."

"The SPOT sheet was designed in such a way that virtually every passenger will exhibit multiple 'behaviors' that can be assigned a SPOT sheet value," a former Behavior Detection Officer manager told the *Intercept*. "These are just 'catch all' behaviors to justify BDO interaction with a passenger. A license to harass."

The Spot Referral Report sorts behaviors into various categories, which are assigned a number of points. Under a preliminary "Observation and Behavior Analysis", behaviors are classified as indicators of

"stress" (1 point each), "fear" (2 points each), or "deception" (3 points each). A score of four or more points justifies a "casual" interrogation, and a score of six or more justifies the involvement of a law enforcement agency.

During "casual" interrogation, travelers are subjected to a further screening process which counts "unusual items", such as toothpaste and prepaid calling cards, and "signs of deception", such as blushing or yawning. Displaying two or more "signs of deception" or scoring a sum of six points under both "Unusual Items" and "Observation and Behavior Analysis" justify a referral to law enforcement.

Thousands of "Behavior Detection Officers" stationed at US airports are trained under the program to detect "microfacial expressions" that reveal "mal-intent". Approximately \$200 million is spent annually on the program. Since its full deployment in 2007, SPOT has cost over \$1 billion.

"Airports are rich environments for the kind of stress, exhaustion, or confusion that the TSA apparently finds suspicious, and research has long made clear that trying to judge people's intentions based on supposed indicators as subjective or commonplace as these just doesn't work," said Hugh Handeyside, a staff attorney with the ACLU's National Security Project, in a statement.

A number of lawsuits have been brought against the Transportation Security Administration by travelers who were detained by SPOT-trained behavior detection officers. Nicholas George was detained for five hours for possessing Arabic flashcards and a book critical of US foreign policy. Frank Hannibal was detained for twenty-four hours for joking to his family about a supposed jar of peanut butter "explosives". Roger Vanderklok, flying to a runner's marathon in Florida,

was detained for over twenty hours for packing his watch and energy bars in a plastic pipe.

The SPOT program is also the subject of a recent lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) against the Transportation Security Administration. The ACLU alleges that the Obama administration has improperly withheld records related to SPOT, and is demanding their release under the Freedom of Information Act.

“The TSA has insisted on keeping documents about SPOT secret, but the agency can’t hide the fact that there’s no evidence the program works,” the ACLU said in a statement announcing the lawsuit.

The “scientific” basis of SPOT has long been exposed to be a heap of lies. Reports by scientists assessing the research on portal screening in 2007, the JASON defense advisory group in 2008, and the Government Accountability Office in 2013 have all concluded that humans are only marginally effective in detecting deception, if at all.

The Department of Homeland Security concluded, “TSA cannot ensure that passengers at US airports are screened objectively, show that the program is cost-effective, or reasonably justify the program’s expansion.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote on March 24, “As is often the case with the projects of America’s political-military-intelligence establishment, what appears on the surface to be laughable incompetence reveals itself upon closer examination to be something more sinister... TSA’s real purpose is to bully public opinion, set authoritarian legal precedents and accustom the public to the stink of a police state.”



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