

Operations

After Vegas shooting, no simple path for hotel security

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The recent shooting in Las Vegas has raised a number of questions about hotel safety and security, but experts said the unpredictability of such attacks mean there are no easy solutions.



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REPORT FROM THE U.S.—A shooting this week in Las Vegas in which the gunman fired down on a concert crowd from his guestroom on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino has raised countless questions for law enforcement, legislators and the public at large.

For hoteliers, the questions are: Could it have been prevented? And what can be done to make it more difficult for something like this to happen again, at another hotel?

Attacks in and around hotels in the U.S. are difficult to predict, legal and security experts said, but there are steps hoteliers can take to make their properties safer for employees, guests and neighbors. Some of those steps, however, create their own sets of challenges.

Unprecedented, unpredictable

Historically in the U.S., courts have ruled that hotels cannot be held liable for unforeseeable attacks like the shooting in Las Vegas, said Stephen Barth, a professor of hospitality law at the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management at the University of Houston and founder of hospitalitylawyer.com.

The exception might be if a hotel employee saw something or the staff otherwise had prior knowledge that could have led to the reasonable assumption that an attack was going to occur and did not act on it.

“In this particular situation, I don’t think we’ve seen any evidence that gives us an indication that the hotel should have been aware this type of thing was going to go on,” he said.

Questions have been raised as to how the shooter was able to bring so many guns into the hotel without the staff noticing, but Barth said it’s important to put the situation into context. The Mandalay Bay is a convention center hotel, he said, and guests bring a lot of bags with them and even have things for exhibit booths shipped in boxes to the hotel. Sometimes those items go to the guests’ rooms, he said, because if the hotel stores it for them, there’s a fee.

If video surveillance shows the gunman carrying guns or gun cases into the hotel, that would raise red flags, he said, but it’s doubtful there was anything that visible going on.

Even if housekeepers went into the gunman’s room, Barth said, the guns and ammunition were likely kept out of sight, in bags or other luggage. Housekeepers are not supposed to go through guests’ luggage, he said.

It’s difficult to balance safety and security against guest privacy and customer care, he said.

People who have committed acts of violence in or against hotels have started using military tactics, techniques and procedures, or TTP, said Jeff Moore, CEO of Muir Analytics, a threat analysis company that has been studying attacks at hotels around the world. For example, those involved in the 2008 attack on hotels in Mumbai performed a raid, he said.

In military terms, a platoon of 20 soldiers atop a hill overlooking their enemy at the bottom of the hill would have one soldier lay down behind a machine gun or long gun, sight the enemy and just “pour bullets” on them, allowing the other soldiers to flank their targets on both sides. With someone shooting like this from above, it’s hard for the people on the ground to get up and move out of fear of being shot, he said.

“The shooter at Mandalay, that’s what he did,” he said. “This is typically used in a warzone. He used this tactic to spray the crowd below.”

Also troubling about the Las Vegas shooting is the fact that it is the first case in the U.S. of a gunman shooting into a crowd with an automatic rifle or rifle modified to simulate an automatic weapon—and possibly the first time this has happened in a non-warzone within a developed country.

“I can’t think of any other instance in a non-warzone city where this has happened,” he said. “It’s significant in that regard. In a horrific way, it broke new ground.”

Guest, baggage screening

Security procedures at hotels across the U.S. currently are not designed to stop an attack like the one in Las Vegas, Moore said. But there are procedures that could be tweaked to help prevent another one, he said.

Baggage screening at hotels is an option, he said. The barrier to this is the hospitality sentiment of hotels in general, he said, and it adds a layer of extra costs, manpower and time delays on guests checking in.

“Nowadays hotels are superb at getting guests in and out quickly,” he said, adding that he is generally a fan of this.

X-ray scans of baggage might be palatable if hotels can do it quickly, Barth said, but the concept of screening guests is problematic. Hotels aren’t like an airport, where travelers are screened before they get on an airplane to leave, he said. Guests are coming and going all the time, he said.

The other challenge with screening in hotels is it can create a bottleneck effect of people waiting for their bags, he said, which means there would be a critical mass of people standing all in one place. The lesson from the airport attack in Brussels is that all the screening pushed the soft target out of the planes and into the uncontrolled lobby of the airport.

There’s also the problem of cost. The federal government collects a tax to pay for screening operations at airports, but it’s not likely that the government would raise a tax for privately held businesses such as hotels.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t look at it,” he said. “I’m saying there are serious impediments to doing it.”

At the same time, U.S. hotel guests are not ready for baggage screening and metal detectors at hotel entrances, said Paul Frederick, president of Hospitality Security Advisors and the former global head of security for Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide.

Some hotels internationally have taken that step, he said, but U.S. guests won’t accept it yet. Hotels in the U.S. haven’t been the target of terrorism like they have been in other countries, he said.

There will come a day when hotels in the U.S. screen guests and luggage before they enter a hotel, Frederick said, but he expects it will take an even worse tragedy than the one in Las Vegas.

Security alternatives

As an alternative to screening, hoteliers could bring in dogs to sniff for explosives, Barth said. Predictive analysis might be another option to help pick up on anomalies, he said.

During a discussion in one of his classes, Barth said a student suggested that hotel owners could install sensors on their guestroom windows that would alert the front desk if a window broke for whatever reason.

All hotel companies should review their policies on weapons at properties, Frederick said. Many states allow people to openly carry as well as have concealed carry in public spaces, but many also allow private entities, such as hotel companies, to put up signs saying guns are not allowed, he said.

“But in my experience, many hotel companies don’t want to do that because they think it’s going to hinder their business with those gun owners,” he said.

If a hotel company wants to prohibit guns from its properties, the prohibition must be clearly posted and the staff must receive information on how to approach any issues if they arise, Frederick said. A lack of a clear policy can create a problem for hotel employees, who may find themselves in the position of having to debate with a guest who has carried a gun onto the property, he said.

A prohibition on firearms wouldn’t have prevented the shooting in Las Vegas, he said, but a policy review is still important.

The first thing hoteliers need to do is retrain their staffs on what to look for, Frederick said. After the Las Vegas shooting, the New York Police Department began going to hotels to offer training on how to recognize what a gun case looks like versus a case for a banner at a convention center, he said.

Short of going through a guest's bags, there are ways housekeepers can be more vigilant, too. Many hotels have a policy that if a guest refuses service to change the sheets for more than two days, housekeeping staff is required to report that to security, Frederick said.

All major hotel companies have done a great job training internal staff about the "If you see something, say something" policy, he said. Every department in a hotel should be an extension of the security staff, he said.

"When anybody asks 'how many security people do you have at a 500-room hotel?' I would say 250 security people," he said. "I say that because there are about 250 employees in that hotel. They're the ones who are going to first see anything suspicious and then bring it to the attention of the security team."

A changing mindset

The shooting is certainly going to be a wake-up call for hoteliers, Barth said. As long as guns are ubiquitous, especially those with near-automatic-firing capabilities, people are going to have to think differently when it comes to security at any place that is open to the public, including restaurants, hotels, fairs and sporting events, he said.

Corporate travel planners are already seeking more safety and security information from hotels with RFPs and in their annual agreements, he said. A challenge here is many hotel brand companies have gone asset-light, he said, so they're dealing with ownership and third-party management companies at their franchises. That makes it harder for brands to respond to safety and security questions on their franchisees' behalf.

"(The shooting) is just going to enhance and intensify the request for information by corporate travel managers and their security probes around hotels," he said.

In Singapore, hotels and their local and federal governments are working together to provide or increase security at hotels, Moore said. In the U.S., security is largely left up to the hotel company, he said, and the local and federal governments don't get involved until after something bad happens.

"(Prevention) depends on how you look at security and how wired tight ... you want (it) to be," he said. "Hotel CEOs are going to have to look at this and make decisions on what they can do to increase security."

Hoteliers will need to become more knowledgeable about what's going on in their neighborhoods now, Frederick said. In the past, security directors would need to keep track of different events nearby to prepare crowd control as people go to and from the events, he said.

"Now hotel security has to think about this in a new profile: Could someone use our hotel to assault an event outside of our hotel because they have a clear view of that situation?" he said.

Hotels aren't built with that in mind; for architects, it's all about the view, Frederick said. He hopes it doesn't have to come to law enforcement telling a hotel it has to leave all of its park-facing guestrooms vacant for three nights during a rock concert at the park.

"Because that would kill the industry," he said.