

Security: Abu Dhabi Will Pay to Play



By John Perkinson, Staff Writer

This summer, ALPA, the AFL-CIO's Transportation Trades Department, Airlines for America, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and other industry groups came together to advocate against a flawed government policy proposal. They're opposing a bill that would use taxpayer-supported foreign aid in a way that would place U.S. airlines and their employees at a competitive disadvantage with their overseas counterparts.

In a joint letter to the Senate's

to be reimbursed by third-party entities, including foreign governments, for setting up customs preclearance facilities in foreign airports currently not served by U.S. airlines. The CBP already maintains 15 preclearance facilities at airports in Canada, the Caribbean, and Ireland. But each of these airports is served by at least one U.S. airline, and the facilities were established as a convenience for U.S. citizens traveling to and from these locations.

International preclearance operations enable U.S. officials to conduct customs, immigration, and agriculture inspections before travelers fly—and in the case of Canada, also drive—to the U.S.

Last year, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano flew to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to meet with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed and other officials. In a move to combat terrorism, Napolitano discussed creating a U.S. Immigration Advisory Program to identify high-risk travelers before they board U.S.-bound flights.

As part of this effort, the U.S. signed a letter of intent with the UAE to arrange for preclearance at Abu Dhabi International Airport. The stated purpose of this action is to increase security and cooperation between the two countries. However, an unintended consequence would significantly benefit UAE state-owned Etihad Airways. Building a

preclearance facility would allow Etihad, an airline that already operates free of corporate taxes, to offer a service not available on most other U.S.-bound routes. In addition, this policy would set an alarming preclearance

edent, opening the door for other foreign airlines to enjoy similar advantages, creating a pay-for-play construct that would shift resources to those most willing to pay, rather than to those with the greatest need. Nothing in the proposed language stipulates that these reimbursement agreements be vetted for national security risks.

"The Air Line Pilots Association firmly believes that, as a matter of policy, the goal of the U.S. government's customs preclearance programs should be to benefit U.S. passengers traveling to their homeland on U.S. airlines," said Capt. Lee Moak, ALPA's president, in an opinion piece that ran in the May 30 *Aviation Daily*. "U.S. taxpayers' money should not be used to give an unfair advantage to foreign airlines."

The other problem with allowing Abu Dhabi a U.S. preclearance facility is that it fails to recognize that Customs facilities within the U.S. are already understaffed. Adding new international accommodations would further stretch CBP's resources, compelling international passengers arriving in the U.S. to stand in even longer processing lines—while making international preclearance that much more desirable.

"Ensuring that the CBP and U.S. lawmakers are taking into account the hypercompetitive nature of our industry, and the airline worker jobs that are at

risk by their decisions, is a top priority for ALPA," said Moak. "As we work toward leveling the playing field for our members in the international marketplace, we need government to work with us to make smart policy decisions to promote and safeguard our workforce, and not policy judgments, made in a vacuum, with no consideration for the consequences." 

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Allowing Abu Dhabi a U.S. preclearance facility would

- let Etihad Airways, an airline that already operates free of corporate taxes, offer a service not available on most other U.S.-bound routes.
- set an alarming policy precedent, opening the door for other foreign airlines to enjoy similar advantages.
- create a pay-for-play construct that would shift resources to those most willing to pay, rather than those who need it most.
- further stretch CBP's already limited resources, compelling international passengers arriving in the U.S. to stand in even longer processing lines. 

Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security chairman and ranking member, ALPA and these other organizations challenged the bill, writing: "This kind of policy choice by U.S. lawmakers clearly undermines the ability of U.S. carriers to compete in the global marketplace and puts American jobs at risk."

Section 555 of Fiscal Year 2013's Department of Homeland Security Appropriations bill would permit U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

Read All About It

In ALPA's white paper "Leveling the Playing Field for U.S. Airlines and Their Employees," the Association addresses government decisions that handicap the U.S. airline industry and measures that must be taken to make U.S.-based airlines competitive and to protect American jobs. To read ALPA's white paper, scan the QR code. 

