Some Problems with Aviation Antiterrorism and Counterterrorism Policy: A Multi-Cultural Communication Approach

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Abstract. This is the third in a continuing IBPP series of articles about aviation terrorism. (See IBPP Vol. 1, Nos. 12 and 15 for the first two articles.) It was presented at the international conference entitled "Aviation Communication: A Multi-Cultural Forum" on April 9, 1997 at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Prescott, Arizona. This article illustrates how five commonly accepted elements of aviation antiterrorism and counterterrorism policy usually perpetuate terrorism as opposed to attenuating it.

There are the usual policy suspects to prevent and manage aviation terrorism: (1) defining the victims of terrorism as innocent; (2) never negotiating with terrorists, let alone giving in to their demands; (3) holding terrorists accountable for terrorist acts; (4) developing profiles of people likely to engage in terrorism; and (5) developing physical assets to achieve antiterrorist and counterterrorist consequences. This paper describes how each of these policies--as reasonable as they might appear to most people-- usually perpetuate terrorism, not attenuate it. And this perpetuation is the result of policymakers profoundly misunderstanding the psychology of multi-cultural communication.

Victims as Innocents. Many national and international definitions of aviation terrorism refer to victims as innocents--combatants who weren't ready to fight, noncombatants who were just going about their daily lives oblivious to a specific political conflict. Yet to many terrorists, all victims are guilty. And they are guilty. The combatants who weren't ready were ready once and will be again. The noncombatants pay taxes to the very government that may be the terrorists' target; can be children who may grow up to pay taxes or be antiterrorist and counterterrorist personnel; or can be women who have the potential to be impregnated, carry these children to term, and nurture them. Noncombatant men, women, and children may give comfort and solace to antiterrorist and counterterrorist forces, forming social support and stress- management systems contributing to antiterrorist and counterterrorist performance.

The very governments and nonstate actors that can engage in total wars over the price of oil, the violation of arbitrary political boundaries, and the need to turn attention from internal political popularity problems attribute the ultimate evil to terrorists who may be using the only effective means available to achieve human rights or civil rights. (This attribution often leads to insipid, culturally relative rebuttals such as "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." In fact, terrorism is a tool that can be applied to many objectives--freedom among others.) Moreover, the very governments and nonstate actors that attack terrorism for attacking the innocent may well engage in terrorism themselves, yet they persist in miscommunicating about innocence among their leaderships, among their followers, and towards terrorists. Not apperceiving that we are all guilty, that we all have it coming, leads to sanctimonious railing--a type of dysfunctional communication-- masquerading as tough policy.

Never Negotiating, Never Giving In. Aviation terrorism is purely a psychological endeavor. Injury, death, destruction, or their threat is intended to achieve political objectives through intermediary psychological processes: fear, anxiety, terror, cowardice, lack of resiliency, the cult-like belief in nonviolent virtue. By stating that they never negotiate, never give in, policymakers are actually adhering to operant learning

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theory tenets--i.e., that the terrorist behavior will be extinguished because it is no longer followed by positive or negative reinforcement.

However, the nature of multi-cultural communication in an era of globalization renders this policy impossible to effect. First, information technologies ensure that terrorist acts will become known--itself reinforcement as political objectives and what needs to occur to stop a specific terrorist campaign are publicized. Second, regardless of policy, many people--through their belief systems--will demand that terrorist acts be reinforced through being awarded their political objective in order to ward off future terrorist behavior. Some of these belief systems feature sacred or secular pacifism, others acontexual stupidity. Thirdly, governments and nonstate actors do negotiate and give in to terrorists regardless of what they communicate in public. Whether the Carter, Reagan, and Kohl Administrations with the Iranian government, the Netanyahu Administration with the Palestinian National Authority, the Yeltsin Administration with the Chechens, the Ortega Administration with the United States Government, Greenpeace with the French Government, the Vietnamese with the Khmer Rouge, the United Nations with countless governments and nonstate actors, the never-negotiating/never-giving-in policy is forever broken. The antiterrorist mantra--"You can run but you can't hide"-- is better invoked as "We just can't help it."

Holding Terrorists Accountable. If terrorism can't be prevented, policymakers assert that terrorists will meet their just deserts. This seems a rather odd dictum from adept practitioners of plausible deniability. International terrorism--and aviation terrorism in particular--often is characterized by widely disparate actors in widely disparate parts of the world engaged in political front groups; solicitations of weapons, money, and safe houses; training; and the like. The more sophisticated cover covert and clandestine intentions with public verbal and nonverbal communications conveying the opposite intent. Examples include rushing victims--those whom you made victims--to hospitals, preventing some of one's followers from harming some of one's adversaries while other followers attempt to kill other adversaries, and privately creating multiple terrorist capabilities, some of which one publicly terms one's own enemies in the quest for peace. National policymakers often compound the problem by expelling known terrorist from their respective countries without formally attributing guilt--which in any case does not minimize future threats to these same countries. These cross-communications--for totalitarian governments and representative democracies alike--render it difficult to attribute blame, let alone develop, authorize, and implement some noxious consequence towards terrorists. Through multi-cultural communication dysfunctions, the terrorist may hoist the target on its own petard. No one, terrorist or policymaker, ends up accountable.

Profiling-Usual Suspects Finding Usual Suspects. Many government commissions have recommended the development of lists of characteristics depicting those most likely to engage in aviation terrorism. The thinking is that the closer likely terrorists get to air assets, the closer they get to being greeted by antiterrorist and counterterrorist personnel. Besides commonly cited problems with the base rates of terrorists and false positive and false negative errors, there are other problems with profiling intimately related to multi-cultural communication. First, even if we could develop reliable and valid profiles, the social transformation of knowledge ensures that the reliability and validity changes through time. An ongoing intelligence collection and analysis capability would need to be instituted to continually support reworking the profiles used by antiterrorist and counterterrorist personnel. Second, profile data--in the continuation of the ancient game of spy-counterspy--inevitably leak so that terrorists can use the profiles as part of their own deceptive strategies. Also, terrorists aware of even the general effort of profiling attempt the random mixing of characteristics with their personnel as far as logistical and psychological constraints allow. Thirdly, in a variant of another ancient game--looking for one's key

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where the light is better, not where one dropped it--most profilers analyze external physical features, behaviors, or demographics. Intrapsychic beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and cognitive processes may be more robust correlates of terrorist behavior but are more difficult to identify. Yet, some forensic psychologists even believe that these correlates either don't exist or are irrelevant in analyzing human behavior. Their professional culture leads to dysfunctional communication about the psychology of terrorism.

Physical Assets. With new information and weapons technologies--especially in aviation terrorism--it becomes easier to capture or kill terrorists. Unfortunately, it also becomes easier to capture and kill victims and destroy material assets. And because of new information technologies, the locus conducive to achieving a terrorist's objective is ever increasing, rendering the antiterrorist's purpose ever more challenging. The use of counterterrorist assets especially often contributes to intractable conflict as it creates martyrs among ideological terrorists and unwitting supporters of terrorism among those of us who are more humane, pacifist, and prisoners of a Golden Mean in which the correct political stance is always in the middle--regardless of the anchor points contributing to judging a specific terrorist event. Fighting terrorism with terrorism--even if effective for a specific incident--reinforces the point that terrorism works, bizarrely, even as a means to achieve the political objective of effectively fighting terrorism.

In conclusion, because of the above multi-cultural communication-related problems with policy, terrorism always has been a feature of the human condition, and luckily for researchers on terrorism, always will be. (See Choi, J-T. (1994.) Aviation terrorism: Historical survey, perspectives and responses. London: Macmillan; Report of the President's commission on international aviation security and terrorism. (May 17, 1990.) United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs. 101st Congress, 2d session; Wall, B. (November, 1993.) Update on recent acts of unlawful interference and industry initiative to combat aviation terrorism. Paper presented at the World aviation security symposium. Hong Kong; Wilkinson, P. (1993.) Aviation security: The fight against terrorism. Interdisciplinary Science Reviews, 18, 163-173.) (Keywords: Terrorism, Aviation.)