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Trends. Terrorism, Behavioral Profiling, and Aviation Security

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the quest to improve aviation security by identifying behavioral indicators for terrorism.

The search for behavioral indicators—e.g., behavioral pattern recognition—that can validly suggest terrorist intent continues in the quest to improve aviation security. This is especially the case at major commercial airports. Commonly embraced indicators include “nervousness,” “[to] avoid eye contact,” and other “suspicious behavior” (cf. Simon, 2002).

There are at least three significant problems with the identification and employment of behavioral indicators. First, there are significant false positive rates associated with specific indicators and combinations of indicators—i.e., there will be many individuals wrongly construed to be risky for security. Processing and adjudicating these mislabeled individuals can create so-called iatrogenic security problems. Second, the base rate of individuals who wish to manifest terrorist behavior is so low that an acceptable error rate for correctly identifying such individuals would need to be unattainably high to compare favorably with the decision to determine all individuals as not risky. Third, denotations for descriptors such as “suspicious” vary significantly in the eye of the beholder and lack sufficient reliability as well as validity—i.e., different people might have very different notions of suspiciousness for the same specific behavior.