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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.

The quest for behavioral profiling as a fix applied to terrorism and aviation security most often reflects almost magical beliefs in scientifically based predictions of human behavior, insufficient appreciation of basic statistics and rudimentary logic, and the hope for financial benefits through selling fielded systems. Unfortunately, it seems that one might more easily predict behaviors of behavioral profilers seeking terrorists than terrorists seeking victims--including behavioral profilers. (See Nijman, H., Merckelbach, H., Evers, C., Palmstierna, T., & a Campo, J. (2002). Prediction of aggression on a locked psychiatric admissions ward. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 105, 390-395; Rosen, L. N., Parmley, A. M., Knudson, K. H., & Fancher, P. (2002). Intimate partner violence among married male U.S Army soldiers: Ethnicity as a factor in self-reported perpetration and victimization. *Violence & Victims*, 17, 607-622; Simon, H. (December 18, 2002). Logan behavior-profiling cops looking at passengers for intent. *Aviation Week's Homeland Security & Defense*, p. 8; Specially trained Logan troopers to watch passengers; First-in-the-nation security initiative based on behavioral criteria. (November 15, 2002). MASSPORT News Release.)