

11-5-2003

## Motivation and Aviation as a Terrorism Target

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### Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2003) "Motivation and Aviation as a Terrorism Target," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 10 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol15/iss10/2>

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Title: Motivation and Aviation as a Terrorism Target

Author: Editor

Volume: 15

Issue: 10

Date: 2003-11-05

Keywords: Aviation Terrorism, Motivation

**Abstract.** This article describes the content and dynamics of terrorist motivation towards targeting aviation.

Can terrorist motivation to target aviation be significantly minimized? For example, could there be a combination of aviation security programs that would deter or attenuate the probability of such attacks?

If terrorists believe that security programs have a high enough degree of effectiveness, either in preventing an operation from beginning or in resolving it to the disadvantage of the terrorist operator once it begins, one might argue that some sort of normative reason, rationality, and logic would lead terrorists to stop terrorism altogether or at least to take their operations elsewhere. However, there are at least three problems with this analysis. The first is that normative reason, rationality, and logic may not characterize certain aspiring and actual terrorists. The second is that a subgroup of terrorists characterized by a psychological nexus that could be labeled as sensation seeking (cf. Aluja et al., 2003) might actually be more likely to engage in terrorism as the threat to the success of their operation increased. The third is that it is quite difficult to identify what specific social action and assumed consequence combined as an aviation security program may be perceived or serve as positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, punishment or omission training (the four main classes of conditioning paradigms) by terrorists considering terrorist action.

As opposed to aviation security programs, the highly likely consequences of being successfully prosecuted and sentenced through a criminal justice system might deter aviation terrorism. However, some terrorists might believe that the odds are always in their favor and would not accept publicly or even privately derived odds to the contrary. Other terrorists might accept the dismal odds of success and still attempt an operation believing that they will be an exception to a general rule of being apprehended, adjudicated, convicted, and sentenced. Still other terrorists might believe that their lives are secondary to attempting the mission and will not be deterred—including but not limiting to suicidal terrorists.

An additional deterrent to the attenuation of terrorist motivation to attack aviation (against the US and its allies as some general Western target) is aviation's global reach. In other words, aviation allows the US and its allies to be accessible globally for attack without the need to infiltrate through the home territory of a target—be it government, business, or their representatives. Thus, attacks that achieve the fully symbolic value favored by many terrorists can occur closer to turf well known to terrorists and less by the target.

Another problem in attenuating terrorist motivation to attack aviation is the class of varied operations that can be chosen—from harming people on the ground or in the air, to destroying aircraft and other aviation materiel on the ground or in the air, to using aircraft and other aviation materiel as weapons. Such variety can quickly overwhelm intelligence resources and their integration into aviation security

and force security authorities into flying blind through fielding security programs based on a risk analysis that really is a vulnerability analysis without adequate threat analysis.

Yet another additional problem is the ongoing tension between good security and aviation's economic bottom line. Historically, this tension underlies swings from too much of one to too much of the other—often based on the recent history of the severity, frequency, and success of terrorism operations. Terrorists can just wait for the pendulum to swing their way.

Unfortunately, aviation terrorism is an activity with a huge terrorist advantage—with terrorist picking their spots while security authorities maintain continuous vigilance; with even operationally unsuccessful terrorist operations achieving at least some psychopolitical success through raising anxiety, distrust in leaders, and pressure towards visible and concurrently ineffective programs among population segments who believe that they are or might be under attack. (See Aluja, A., Garcia, O., & Garcia, L. F. (2003). Relationships among extraversion, openness to experience, and sensation seeking. *Personality & Individual Differences*, 35, 671-680; Greenberg, J., Martens, A., Jonas, E., Eisenstadt, D., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (2003). Psychological defense in anticipation of anxiety: Eliminating the potential for anxiety eliminates the effect of mortality salience on worldview defense. *Psychological Science*, 14, 516-519; Muraven, M., & Baumeister, R. F. (1997). Suicide, sex, terror, paralysis, and other pitfalls of reductionist self-preservation theory. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 36-40; Peleg, S. (1997). They shoot prime ministers, too, don't they? Religious violence in Israel: Premises, dynamics and prospects. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 20, 227-247.)

Keywords: Aviation Terrorism, Motivation