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## Terrorist Motivation and Preferred Aviation Targets

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**Abstract.** This article describes the content and dynamics related to terrorist preference for aviation targets.

Terrorists seek to maximize psychopolitical impact—e.g., influence on worldviews, ideologies, policy preferences, preferred lifestyles, and related behaviors of physical and psychological survivors and of other direct and indirect observers of terrorist operations—through their operations so as to ultimately induce behavioral change in the world that corresponds to desired political goals. But what can be said about preference for specific targets?

There certainly are well-documented cases of a positive correlation between the magnitude of people killed or injured, materiel destroyed, and/or the threat of killing/injury/destruction and the magnitude of psychopolitical impact—and ultimately behavioral change corresponding to desired political goal. A common example of a positive correlation would be the response of quick, intensive, costly, and often wrong-headed security programs instituted in response to great human tragedy—e.g., as occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Such a response may exacerbate human anxiety, constrain lifestyles, misallocate resources, and heighten the vulnerability of a target in the face of a sophisticated, flexible, and mobile terrorist foe for the next terrorist attack. Or the security response may affect psychopolitical phenomena in a manner bringing the target closer to acting in a manner that will achieve terrorist desired goals—e.g., cutting political alliances with governments that are abhorred by specific terrorist entities as an intended vehicle to assuage terrorists and preclude further attack. This last maneuver, however, usually has the opposite effect.

However, there also can be cases of a negative correlation or even no correlation between the magnitude of killing/injury/destruction on the one hand and psychopolitical impact on the other. Moreover, the same terrorist action may have different impacts at different times. In addition, the same impact may lead to different political consequences of a behavioral nature at different times that may or may not be congruent with the desired political goals that may have set the whole terrorist operation in motion.

One example of non-positive correlation would be the killing of one or a small number of people at an unexpected venue that plays more to the terrorists' advantage than yet another significant extravaganza of tragedy that was publicly predicted by hordes of terrorist experts. A concrete variant of this might be flying a small plane into a small church or school in a rural portion of the US and killing virtual unknowns as opposed to attacking large numbers of people in famous sites in New York or Washington, D.C.

Another example would be the same 9/11 attacks. As an illustration of the same and different people being affected differently through their perceptions of these very significant attacks, Peterson & Seligman (2003) found that at least some groups of individuals showed increases in characteristics undesired by terrorists—viz., gratitude, hope, kindness, leadership, love, spirituality, and teamwork.

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The upshot of non-positive correlations between magnitude of terrorist attack and magnitude of psychopolitical impact is to render even more complex the intelligence task of identifying relevant information for aviation security and how it is to be integrated into an aviation security posture—an advantage to be exploited by sophisticated terrorists. (See Krinsley, K. E., Gallagher, J. G., Weathers, F. W., Kutter, C. J.; & Kaloupek, D. G. (2003). Consistency of retrospective reporting about exposure to traumatic events. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 16, 399-409; Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2003). Character strengths before and after September 11. *Psychological Science*, 14, 381-384; Shechter, R.A. (2003). Transference enactment triggered by terrorism-trauma. *Issues in Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 25, 21-36; Stuart, J.A., Ursano, R.J., Fullerton, C.S., Norwood, A.E., & Murray, K. (2003). Belief in Exposure to Terrorist Agents: Reported Exposure to Nerve or Mustard Gas by Gulf War Veterans. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease*, 191, 431-436.)