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# MASSACRE IN LAS VEGAS: a mental health lesson for the avsec community

by Philip Baum

At first glance, the links between the massacre, which took place in Las Vegas on 1 October, and aviation security appear tenuous. Yes, when Stephen Paddock opened fire on the crowd at the Route 91 Harvest country music festival, he also hit two fuel tanks belonging to Swissport on the grounds of McCarran International Airport and could have initiated a conflagration, which would have significantly increased the already all-too-high death toll. Yes, his girlfriend had worked for an airline in the past. And yes, Paddock was certified as a private pilot (on 17 November 2003) to fly fixed-wing aircraft with a single-engine and, according to reports, even owned two light aircraft himself; his pilot's licence had lapsed in 2013. But these are just interesting facts. The real lesson for the aviation industry lies in the profile of the perpetrator of the atrocity.

At the time of writing (on 4 October, just before this issue goes to press) it would appear that Stephen Paddock was not, despite ISIS' claims, an Islamic fundamentalist. And, as such, both the media and the establishment have been reluctant to brand him a terrorist. We still do not know his motive and all those close to the multimillionaire gambler, former accountant and property developer appear baffled by his actions. Investigators will, no doubt, carry out a forensic psychological examination and a clearer picture may well emerge of his 'rationale' for carrying out the worst massacre by a lone gunman on American soil, a death toll only eclipsed on the international stage by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway in 2011. In Breivik's case, we know the agenda was political – an act of right-wing extremism. In that vein, we should also not forget the actions of Oklahoma City bombers, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who were responsible for the deaths of 168 people in 1995 in a calculated act of terrorism using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (as opposed to a mass shooting).

Many are quick to associate aviation security with counter-terrorism, and more specifically the fight against Islamic fundamentalism. Attend security conferences around the globe and more often than not there are papers on Da'esh or al Qaeda, a focus on returning foreign fighters and the associated insider threat, and debate over radicalisation, its prevention and identification. Yet how often do we really examine right-wing terrorism?

This year, 'The Investigative Fund' at The Nation Institute and 'Reveal' from The Center for Investigative Reporting, published their analysis of terrorist attacks perpetrated in the United States between January 2008 and December 2016. They identified "63 cases of Islamist domestic terrorism" and of these, 76% were foiled plots. In that same period, "right-wing extremists were behind nearly twice as many incidents: 115." Of these, 35% were foiled.

Many don't like figures such as these as they do not tell the real story of how many people were killed. After all, surely when Islamist attacks succeed, the death toll is higher? Well, I'm afraid the facts reveal that right-wing extremist terrorism can be just as deadly. "Nearly a third of incidents involved fatalities, for a total of 79 deaths, while 13 percent of Islamist cases caused fatalities." The total number of deaths associated with Islamist incidents was indeed higher, at 90, but primarily because of one 2009 mass shooting incident (at Fort Hood).

**"...most security professionals are actually far happier discussing guns, ammunition, explosives and organised crime – all being fairly macho subjects – than they are about the more touchy-feely areas surrounding mental health..."**

Suicidal terrorism, particularly the breed espoused by the likes of Da'esh, must, of course, continue to be addressed. People are, after all, queuing up to die in kamikaze-style actions around the globe. But let's not be so fixated on one threat.

It's not only right-wing terrorism that we are failing to address; it is also the threat posed by those individuals with psychological problems. Stephen Paddock may well be a case in point. The aviation security community is often too quick to claim that incidents associated with the mental health of passengers, employees or crewmembers are 'safety' issues and not 'security' concerns, even if our objective is clearly to prevent any act of criminal interference with civil aviation. The Germanwings disaster of 2015 was not something that security professionals truly wished to engage in debate about. Yes, new regulations and recommendations were introduced regarding the number of crewmembers who should be on the flight deck, but to what extent did the security community really discuss issues surrounding mental health? Indeed, when was the last time you went to an aviation security conference and listened to papers on related topics? I am sure there is the occasional exception to the 'rule', but I doubt that there is any comparison with the time allocated to discussing terrorism.

Why? Forgive me if I say that I think that most security professionals are actually far happier discussing guns, ammunition, explosives and organised crime – all being fairly macho subjects – than they are about the more touchy-feely areas surrounding mental health. It's why many in the industry struggle with cyber security issues – it's not our background, and therefore not in our psyche. We perceive the enemy as somebody who is armed and with whom we can engage with on the battlefield...as we did in the 'good old days' of hijacking.

But those people harbouring deep-rooted psychological problems can also be those to bear arms. And yet they don't fit the stereotypical profile of the Islamic fundamentalist. Most are, to be fair, still males, but most are also white. Stephen Paddock





may, at age 64, have been older than the majority of angry young men on the rampage, but he's not unique. The deadliest mass shooting in British history was carried out by Thomas Hamilton, aged 43, when he walked into a school in Dunblane in 1996 and killed 16 children and their teacher.

The best lesson we can take from the Las Vegas massacre (at this early stage) is the need to accept that anybody can be a threat and that those with psychological problems are as much of a potential threat to society, including aviation, as Islamic fundamentalists. I am not suggesting that we start focusing exclusively on young white males - like Adam Lanza (killed 28 people at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012), Martin Bryant (killed 35 people at Port Arthur, Tasmania, in 1996), Dylann Roof (killed nine at a Charleston church in 2015), Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (killed 15 people at Columbine High School in 1999) and Pekka-Eric Auvinen (killed eight at Jokela High School, Finland, in 2007) - but there are, as the list shows, so many examples that a blinkered view of the threats we face in society is neither acceptable nor good security practice.

Guns, and more specifically people's attitudes towards guns, are a major problem (I have heard one of these weapons of death being called 'a little beauty'). Sure, they can be necessary defensive tools, but some of those on the market to civilians far exceed the firepower needed to deter an intruder, and there is no justification for the purchase of multiple weapons, let alone an entire arsenal. All of the above incidents were perpetrated by gun enthusiasts, and it would seem that Stephen Paddock was one *par excellence*. In the USA alone this year, at the time of writing, 11,799 people have been killed in firearms incidents, excluding acts of suicide; there have also been 275 mass shooting incidents.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution states that, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed", and, as a result, we know the gun debate there is a political hot potato. I guess the rest of the civilised world can at least take some comfort in that most states have taken steps to drastically reduce the number of firearms in circulation. In Australia, for example, after the aforementioned Port Arthur massacre, the National Firearms Agreement was speedily introduced and gun crime has significantly reduced in the aftermath; some 650,000 guns were bought from their owners by the Australian government. Today, it is only Mexico, Guatemala and the US that actually still constitutionally afford citizens the right to bear arms.

Eradicating guns is a pipe dream. We need, therefore, to identify the individuals who wish to misuse them. Paddock's target may have been the festival below, but his actions took place in the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino. I struggle to believe that Paddock was typical of the guests staying there at the time. After all, he took at least 10 suitcases and 23 guns, and associated ammunition, up to the 32nd floor; surely somebody must have seen something strange? Surely a room cleaner must have noticed the unusual 'equipment'? Or, if reports are true that a 'Do Not Disturb' sign was in situ for three days, precluding such observation, that too should have commanded investigation. There's simply no way Paddock could have been 'baseline'.

And if that in itself is not a lesson, then perhaps we ought to consider whether somebody who was a former holder of a private pilot's licence could have also attacked the concert-goers in another way... ■

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