



Homeland
Security



Federal Bureau
of Investigation

JOINT INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN

(U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida and the Threat to General Aviation

2 September 2011

(U) Scope

(U//FOUO) This Joint Intelligence Bulletin is intended to provide federal, state, local, tribal, and private sector partners with new insight into the enduring interest of al-Qa'ida and violent extremists in targeting general aviation, particularly small aircraft. This bulletin also is intended to support the activities of DHS and the FBI and to assist government counterterrorism and law enforcement officials in effectively preventing and responding to terrorist attacks against the United States. This bulletin is based on reporting on al-Qa'ida's and al-Qa'ida-inspired violent extremists' current and historical interest in targeting general aviation. This bulletin addresses threats related to the use of small aircraft as weapons, but does not address chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear threats to aviation.

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(U) Key Findings

(U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida and its affiliates have maintained an interest in obtaining aviation training, particularly on small aircraft, and in recruiting Western individuals for training in Europe or the United States, although we do not have current, credible information or intelligence of an imminent attack being planned against aviation by al-Qa'ida or its affiliates.

(U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida, its affiliates, and al-Qa'ida-inspired violent extremists have targeted US aviation since the mid-1990s, using a variety of evolving tactics.

(U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida and its affiliates will continue attempts to identify and exploit vulnerabilities and gaps in aviation security. Al-Qa'ida and its affiliates have adapted and modified their tactics in response to changes in US security measures.

(U//FOUO) Violent extremists with knowledge of general aviation and access to small planes pose a significant potential threat to the Homeland.

(U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida Views the US General Aviation Subsector as an Attractive Target

(U//FOUO) As of early 2011, al-Qa'ida considered options for targeting the aviation sector, possibly believing such operations would have a greater impact than other types of attacks.

- (U//FOUO) Members of al-Qa'ida have maintained a desire to obtain aviation training, particularly on small personal aircraft.
- (U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida members have discussed obtaining private aircraft to carry explosives.
- (U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida has expressed interest in finding a Western operative with official documentation that would allow him to travel to Europe and to the United States for aviation training. Al-Qa'ida would also encourage this operative to become a flight instructor.
- (U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida appears to have considered renting private planes for use in attacks, believing supervision would be lax due to the large number of private aircraft.

(U//FOUO) What is General Aviation?

(U//FOUO) The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) defines general aviation as all flights that are not regularly scheduled commercial-passenger, cargo, or military aircraft. General aviation accounts for the overwhelming majority of currently registered aircraft in the United States. In 2009 (the most recent year for which data are currently available), the Federal Aviation Administration reported that over 223,900 general aviation aircraft were active in the United States, in comparison to 18,651 scheduled commercial aircraft.

(U//FOUO) Over 68 percent of general aviation aircraft are personally owned private aircraft—mostly small, single- or twin-engine propeller airplanes. Some helicopters and jets—including a very few large airliner aircraft—are registered as personally owned aircraft.

- (U//FOUO) Corporate and business aircraft, many of which are jets of up to airliner size, comprise some 15 percent of general aviation aircraft.
- (U//FOUO) Other categories of general aviation aircraft include instructional aircraft, air ambulances, crop dusters, news helicopters, and aircraft used in civil government operations.

(U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliates Eyeing Vulnerabilities and Gaps in Security

(U//FOUO) Violent extremists have adapted and modified their tactics in response to changes in US security measures in the past, and al-Qa'ida, its affiliates, and al-Qa'ida-inspired violent extremists will likely try to identify and exploit vulnerabilities and gaps in general aviation security, which may make attacks using small aircraft appear more achievable.

- (U) The November 2010 edition of AQAP's *Inspire* magazine discusses experimenting with ways to bring down airliners and researching devices capable of passing through airport security systems.
- (U//FOUO) As of August 2009, al-Qa'ida discussed research and development of an explosive material that could pass through airport security, as well as possibly conducting a test run with the material at an unnamed airport.
- (U//FOUO) Al-Qa'ida believed that after September 11, 2001 there were still weaknesses and gaps in US aviation security, despite new regulations, and there could still be ways to conduct operations undetected.

(U//FOUO) Unauthorized Use and Thefts of Small Planes Show Potential Threat to the Homeland

(U//FOUO) Lone offenders without ties to violent extremist organizations and members of terrorist groups such as al-Qa'ida, with general aviation training and knowledge, pose a potential threat to the Homeland because their plans to misuse or steal small aircraft would be difficult to monitor and predict. The following examples of non-terrorism related incidents in the general aviation subsector highlight the threat this tactic may pose from al-Qa'ida, its affiliates, or al-Qa'ida-inspired violent extremists.

- (U) In July 2010, the Bahamas deported an identified US person who had crashed a stolen private plane there; the individual later pleaded guilty in the United States to charges that included stealing and operating a small aircraft. During a cross-country burglary and vehicle theft spree that preceded his

deportation, he allegedly stole other planes and traveled more than 1,000 miles by plane without flight training, learning to fly from flight manuals and the Internet.

- (U//FOUO) In April 2009, a Turkish-born Canadian stole a Cessna 172 aircraft from a flight school in Thunder Bay, Canada and flew hundreds of miles across the United States on an apparent joyride before landing on a dirt road in Missouri. The individual served a 24-month sentence in the United States for aircraft theft and was deported back to Canada in March 2011.
- (U) In January 2002, a 15-year-old boy with aviation training died when he deliberately crashed a small plane into a Florida office building. A note recovered from the scene revealed the boy's support for bin Ladin, but there are no indications the boy had connections with terrorist organizations.

(U) Lone Offender

(U//FOUO) An individual motivated by one or more extremist ideologies who operates alone and supports or engages in acts of violence in furtherance of that ideology or ideologies that may involve direction, assistance, or influence from a larger terrorist organization or a foreign actor.

(U) Suggested Protective and Security Measures

(U//FOUO) TSA encourages the general aviation community to consider the following suggested protective and security measures:

- (U//FOUO) TSA recommends and supports a robust program of suggested protective and security measures for the US general aviation subsector.
- (U//FOUO) Secure unattended aircraft to prevent unauthorized use.
- (U//FOUO) Verify the identification of crew and passengers prior to departure.
- (U//FOUO) Verify that baggage and cargo are known to the persons on board.
- (U//FOUO) Where identification systems are in place, encourage employees to wear proper identification and challenge persons not wearing proper identification.
- (U//FOUO) Direct increased vigilance to unknown pilots and clients for aircraft rental or charters, as well as unknown service or delivery personnel.
- (U//FOUO) Be alert to, aware of, and report persons masquerading as pilots, security personnel, emergency medical technicians, or other personnel using uniforms or vehicles as methods to gain access to aviation facilities or aircraft.
- (U//FOUO) Be alert, aware of and report aircraft with unusual or unauthorized modifications.

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- (U//FOUO) Be alert to, aware of, and report persons loitering in the vicinity of aircraft or air operations areas, as well as persons loading unusual or unauthorized payload onto aircraft.
- (U//FOUO) Be alert to, aware of, and report persons who appear to be under stress or under the control of other persons.
- (U//FOUO) Be alert to, aware of, and report persons whose identification appears altered or inconsistent.
- (U//FOUO) Aircraft operators are reminded to check all NOTAMs for the latest information on temporary flight restrictions.
- (U//FOUO) Report the theft of any general aviation aircraft immediately to the appropriate authorities and the TSA General Aviation Hotline at 866-GA-SECURE (866-427-3287).

(U) Reporting Notice

(U) DHS and the FBI encourage recipients of this document to report information concerning suspicious or criminal activity to the local FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force and State and Major Urban Area Fusion Center. The FBI's 24/7 Strategic Information and Operations Center can be reached by telephone number 202-323-3300 or by email at SIOC@ic.fbi.gov. The DHS National Operations Center (NOC) can be reached by telephone at (202) 282-9685 or by email at NOC.Fusion@dhs.gov. FBI regional phone numbers can be found online at <http://www.fbi.gov/contact/fo/fo.htm> and State and Major Urban Area Fusion Center information may be obtained at <http://www.dhs.gov/contact-fusion-centers>. For information affecting the private sector and critical infrastructure, contact the National Infrastructure Coordinating Center (NICC), a sub-element of the NOC. The NICC can be reached by telephone at (202) 282-9201 or by email at NICC@dhs.gov. When available, each report submitted should include the date, time, location, type of activity, number of people and type of equipment used for the activity, the name of the submitting company or organization, and a designated point of contact.

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