

## **Security environment at the Bacha Khan International Airport, Peshawar**

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### **Abstract**

The post 9/11 tides of terrorism in Pakistan badly affected the aviation industry of the country. Acts of terrorism were perpetrated at different airports of the country. Bacha Khan International Airport (BKIA) Peshawar remained the most affected due to frequent terrorist attacks. This article dissects the reasons behind the terrorist activities in and around BKIA. The location, vulnerabilities and some big terror incidents at BKIA have been discussed and analysed in this study. Security measures at airports have been looked into. It has been investigated as to why complete prevention of terrorist incidents at all the airports in general and BKIA in particular are so difficult. The multidimensional impact of terrorism on Pakistani aviation industry does not appear much researched about. This article specifically focuses on the impact of terrorism on BKIA Peshawar. The types of attacks and their respective impact have also been discussed. The passengers and visitors' difficulties in reaching the airport have been chronicled. The study also carries some workable recommendations for the government, the response of the people and need for an advanced security mechanism for protection and promotion of aviation industry in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** BKIA, Terrorism, Aviation Industry, Security, Funnel Area, MANPAD, Threats

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### **Introduction**

Located inside the heavily fortified Cantonment area of bustling Peshawar city, BKIA previously, which was formerly referred to as Peshawar International Airport, is the fourth busiest airport in the country. A just 10-minute drive from the main centre of the historic city can take you to the airport (Quadri & Quadri, 2014).

The city shares borders of former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Bara, a sub-division of Khyber tribal district, is a few miles away from BKIA. The geographical location made the airport an easy target for terrorist attacks during the during the past two decades. Also, this airport is surrounded by commercial and residential buildings that are a big security peril. The airport is frequently targeted for two main reasons. First, its proximity with ex-FATA and second its runway is also used by Gunship helicopters and jet fighters. This airport is unique of its kind in the whole world as a railway track passes through

its runway. This airport is jointly used by the Civil Aviation Authority and Pakistan Air Force. Further, its runway is also used by the Army Aviation and as such is one of the busiest airports in Pakistan. This Airport provides a great deal of facilitation to the People of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Almost all of the KP-Middle East flights are covered from this airport.

Although this airport is not much large in structure as compared to other airports of the country but a huge number of passengers and visitors frequently visit this airport for their travelling requirements. Almost all the flights are destined to the Middle East and currently there is no direct flight to any of the European country from this airport. A few years back there was a direct flight to London from BKIA Peshawar by PIA, the national flag carrier but due to least number of passengers it too was abandoned. This airport is witnessing a large number of passengers, visitors and flights on daily basis. Furthermore, during the taking off, aircrafts uses the Tehkal (a village on the north side of the airport) side which is quite safe as compared to the other side of Pishtakhara (a village on the west side of the airport). Because the Pishtakhara side is situated in close proximity of the Khyber district and terrorists have already targeted an air borne plane of the Pakistan International Airline from that side and even fired rockets a number of times from unknown places of Bara region, Khyber district.

Frequent terrorist attacks have affected the aviation industry in Pakistan by raising fear among the general population who travel by air. This fear has disturbed their life and routine travelling. It has caused irreparable damage to the economic activities and given birth to a security dilemma. It has also made the passengers to take their flights from other airports of the country instead of Peshawar and has thus, caused inconvenience to the people. They are unable to move fearlessly even in their own country. The question is how to solve this problem so that security situation could be made up to the mark and how the inmates and installations of airport could be made secure from terrorists. Terrorists have carried out many attacks on the airports in Pakistan that have not only created law and order problems but also damaged the economy of the country. Due to these attacks flight operations during night time have been suspended by the airport management and law enforcement agencies at BKIA Peshawar. With every new incident in the city of Peshawar apprehended foreign airlines and many suspended their flights to the provincial metropolis. Why such an extreme situation aroused in which the airlines have stopped operations from this airport.

### **Significance of the study**

This research article relates its discussion to the Securitisation Theory. This theory challenges traditional approaches to security in international affairs and asserts that issues are not essentially threatening themselves; rather, it is by referring them as 'security' issues when they actually become security

problems. The theory states that a country's national security policy is not a natural given, but is very carefully prepared by politicians and decision-makers. Issues are to be dealt with urgently once they have been labelled as 'dangerous', 'menacing', 'threatening', or 'alarming' by 'securitising actors' who must also have the social and institutional power to tackle the issue 'beyond politics'. Issues need to be properly articulated as security problems before going for solution. Broadly, economic, societal, military, political and environmental sectors are described as sector of security studies. In each sector, a specific issue could be articulated as threatening referent issue. For example calling immigration a 'threat to security', would need appropriate groundwork to place it as a high priority issue before closing the borders etc (Clara E., 2018).

A lot of work has been done on aviation and terrorism. However, none of them focuses on Pakistan or any of its airports. Some newspaper articles have been published on the topic and little work has been done over the Pakistani Airports. Moreover, this study is an effort to cover all aspects of the attacks and terrorism at BKIA Peshawar. Chaliand and Blin (2007) have discussed terrorism, the history of terrorism and particularly the way it is spreading. It also differentiates between the old and new forms of terrorism. The effects of terrorism are for long time and what happens today has its impacts on future. Wilkinson & Jenkins (1999) have focused on aviation terrorism especially the threat and vulnerabilities of aviation industry in the existing threatened situations. The authors have discussed the potential threat to air cargo and the missile attacks on the aviation installations. They also gave a thorough picture of the aviation security in the western countries.

Abeyratne (2013) has discussed different Aviation Conventions and laws made until 2012 and reviewed their implementation by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). The author has also examined the morals and ethics of the air navigations. This study also includes the Chicago Convention and effective measures to make the air journey safe and sound. Ansari (2014) has discussed that the Karachi Airport attack was the first of terrorist attacks against the aviation industry and government installations after issuing threat warnings. The terrorists used their intelligence very cleverly by recycling the different aspects of their attacks and were well equipped.

This study is important in the context of prevailing environment of threat to the overall security in general, and to the aviation industry in particular. It also highlights the consequences of the terrorist attacks on the important installations i.e. airports. Airports are important installations and their security is of prime importance for the development of any country. Airports are the gateways to a country and any untoward incident towards aviation industry can disturb the smooth functioning of international traffic and the related processes. Bacha Khan International Airport is the only international airport in the province of

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there is no alternate international airport in KP to cater the needs of this Province. It is therefore, very important to rebuild the confidence of people by improving the safety and security situation. Due to terrorism at this airport all the people who benefit from this airport suffer and generally its impact goes down the city.

### **Terrorism incidents at BKIA and their impact**

To understand how BKIA has been affected by terrorism, some of the terror incidents are discussed here. On 26 December 2006 at 7:10 am a powerful time bomb, planted in a car, parked beside the main Khyber road outside Peshawar Airport exploded that killed one person injured two other. Bomb disposal squad officials said that the bomb weighed around two kilograms. It completely destroyed the car it was planted in. It also collapsed the boundary wall of Risalla Lane opposite to the main entry gate parking of the Peshawar airport where six vehicles were damaged. The explosion did not disrupt the schedule of flights however the airport's entry and exit gates were closed for some hours. Malik Saad, Peshawar City Chief Police Officer told media that the car used in the blast was stolen about 10 days ago from Islamabad (Daily Time, 27 December 2006)

On 28 April, 2007, a bomb blast inside the Peshawar International Airport rocked the sensitive cantonment of the city, triggering a wave of fear among hundreds of passengers in the compound. The device was attached with a timer and planted in crates of soft drinks inside the canteen. The explosive device weighing 150 to 200 grams went off at 6.55am, but did not hurt anyone inside the airport building. Following the explosion, the Airport Security Force and other law-enforcement agencies further tightened security measures in and around the airport building. All the passengers and vehicles entering the airport premises were being thoroughly checked. This was another attempt to disrupt the smooth functioning of the airport but fortunately, it again could not make any casualty except some damage to the canteen. Although, it created panic among the visitors and passengers however, it did not suffer the flight operation at BKIA as desired by the terrorists (M. Khan, Personal Interview, 22 December 2014).

On 8 July 2009 at about 02.20 hours, a Rocket fired from Western side of Peshawar, probably from Tribal Area, landed at International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) Tarmac in front of Pakistan State Oil (PSO) depot. Resultantly, a splinter hit against left engine of ICRC aircraft, causing one inch hole. A few splinters also reached nearby main car parking area. After a few seconds 3 more Rockets were fired at Pakistan Air Force (PAF) area near the Air Traffic Control (ATC) Tower. No loss to the human lives was reported. However, one PAF person was reported as injured (Kamil, 2010).

On 10 August 2009 at about 23.05 hours, more than twelve rockets were reportedly fired by unknown terrorists. One rocket out of them landed at FC Camp Phase – VI, Hayatabad area, damaging the MI Room without any loss to human life, whereas, 4 rockets hit civil population about 1½ Km away from Runway end and the remaining rockets fell at Pishtakhara area near the airport, resulting into death of two and injuring ten civilians (Daily "Mashriq" 4 August, 2009). On 3 October 2009 at about 02.25 hours, four to five rockets were reportedly fired by unknown terrorists from unknown area out of which only one landed in PAF Base area near 16 Squadron, whereas, the others in surrounding area of the airport. No loss of human life was reported. Flight operation remained normal (The Daily News, 4 October 2009).

On 15 December 2012 at about 20.31 hours, during landing of PIA transit flight PK-755 (LHR-PEW-RUH) sound of explosion was heard from western side of the airport near University town (The Nation, 16 December 2012). Meanwhile sound of 3 more explosions was also heard at 2032, 2035 & 2037 hours respectively and a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) struck with the perimeter wall at western side of the airport opposite to 9th Army Aviation Unit near runway, due to which approximately 60 feet of perimeter wall was blown up at Abdara Road adjacent to University town in which 2 militants were killed. 3 militants were shot dead during an intrusion attempt by PAF and army combaters. Dozens of the stray bullets fell at the apron during the occurrence. According to PAF, all the area was combed and no militant was found. No Casualty of PAF, DSG, Army, Police and ASF personnel was occurred. Except a police man was hit at his duty on Abdara road at the back side of the airport and several other civilians were injured due to the blasts and cross firing. It is also worth mentioning here that the same time Pakistan International Airline (PIA) flight PK-755 was parked on apron and 34 passengers on board. All the passengers were disembarked from the aircraft and were brought to the international departure lounge by the Airport Security Staff. Mian Iftikhar Hussain, of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Minister for Information visited the airport at about 22.00 hours during the crisis. He went to different areas of the airport and met with Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and Defence Security Guards (DSG) personnel. On 16 December 2012 at about 10.45 hours, runway of the airport was cleared by PAF and CAA for operation (Rabbi, 2012).

BKIA is the only Airport that has been targeted by the terrorists many times more than any other airport in the world. Landing of rockets at the premises of this Airport is a routine matter. On 26 February 2014 three rockets were fired from an unidentified direction towards the Airport and Pakistan Air Force base in Peshawar but luckily it neither hit the Airport nor the base. One of these rockets hit the University Road which is in the North-east of the airport, the second fell near Shaheen Camp which is adjacent to the Pakistan Air Force Base and the third in the Gora Qabristan area but without causing any casualty.

Its funnel area is also not safe. On 24 June 2014, an incoming PIA passenger flight was targeted while landing at Peshawar airport. It was hit in the funnel area near Pishtakhara prior to landing. Resultantly, one lady passenger and two cabin crew (Flight stewards) got injuries. Later, it was revealed that the lady passenger expired in the hospital. After thorough search, it was revealed that eight bullets hit the aircraft. Disturbance of schedule of flights, cancellation and diversion of incoming flights is a frequent practice. After this incident Emirates Airline flight EK-636/637 was cancelled and Etihad Airways flight EY-261 diverted to Benazir Bhutto International Airport Islamabad (K. Atlas, Personal Interview 25 June, 2014).

Throughout that night operations were closed by the concerned circles due to security reasons. However, some of the aircrafts resumed flights during night time. Three arrivals/departures took place during night time on 16th February by Airlines which was viewed seriously by the Civil Aviation managers and issued warnings to the concerned airlines that if something happened to them or the passengers on board, the airline will be responsible (Daily Mashriq, 17 February, 2015).

Terrorist attacks on the aviation industry have affected the smooth and easy travelling of the passengers. Passengers have to pass through a thoroughly frisking and security channels. Moreover, the duty of security agencies inside and outside airports has become difficult because of the terrorist threats. Furthermore, the visitors (to receive and see off passengers) also face difficulties because the aviation division has restricted the entry of visitors to airports in Pakistan due to security reasons (The Daily Aaj, 2014). The number of security personnel has been also increased in the vicinity of airports. At BKIA Peshawar, the inside and outside security has been enhanced in order to prevent any unfavourable situation. However, increase in the security checking system has made difficulties for the movement of people towards the Airport. Tourists from different corners of the world do not take a risk at moving to and from this Airport and they prefer to visit other tourism spots in Pakistan instead of coming to the beautiful places of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Most politicians and elites prefer to get on board from Benazir Bhutto International Airport (BBIA) Islamabad instead of BKIA, Peshawar. Those who have to travel from Peshawar come in a fool proof security to the airport. Access to the BKIA, Peshawar is very difficult that has badly affected its cargo services as well.

Another very important impact that cannot be ignored is that BKIA is the only international airport of KP. Almost all of the pilgrims from the province use this airport for their Hajj and Umra flights. Journey for such high value religious and spiritual worships needs an extremely relaxed environment and peace of mind. Unfortunately, the pain and stress the pilgrims pass through due to a tense

environment and extraordinary security measures at the airport badly affect their spirit and enthusiasm both while departing and returning.

### **Potential Risks and Threats**

Aviation industry, being a big commercial activity, enjoys the level of a major revenue generating source for each country. Threats for the airports throughout the world are almost of the same nature (Button & Taylor, 2000). The terrorists try to adopt the ways and means that are easy for them to perpetrate terrorism acts at the place of their choice. Moreover, they often try to carry out their subversive activities by using new and unique technique to meet their objectives. Still there are some basic aspects and similarities in every attack, which are very important for the security agencies to analyze and make security more and more secure and prepare to cope with any type of attack. Such type of analysis and rehearsals bring the security agencies at a position to predict the nature of possible attacks and the capability to cope with them as well. Keeping in view the importance of Pakistani airports and especially the BKLA the following national, regional and local threats are impeding its security.

### **Threats**

Threats of hijacking of aircraft, sabotage activity on ground and in the air and threats of missile attack on aircraft (Polski, 1994). Moreover, threats of raid on aircraft on ground, threats of rocket attacks on airport; threats of suicidal attacks at the airport and threats of Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED). Furthermore, threats of forced breaking of perimeter range, threats of sabotage of Vulnerable Points (VPs); threats of surreptitious infiltration of perimeter, threats of hostage taking of passengers or others and threats of attack on lounges for killing people; threats of attacks on Very Very Important Personnel VVIPs /VIPs in airport premises, and threats from known terrorist organization and any specific threats to airlines.

By far the utmost threat that is supposed to be, is probable bombings of the aircraft, suicide skyjackings and attacks which use an airplane as a weapon against different important targets (like the 9/11 attacks). It lurks as a risk not only for commercial travellers, cargo aircrafts, but also for General Aviation (GA) operators as well (Swenson & Russell, 2004). Moreover, in the face of enhanced security measures that surround the passenger carrier manoeuvres, the terrorists may decide to pose an explicit danger to aircraft by using Man Portable Air Defence Systems (MANPADS) which is liquidated out of the perimeter fence of the airport or other standoff weapons to target a commercial airplane. An action plan against MANPADS was approved by the Leaders of G8 countries at the summit in Evian in 2003, and again in the same year the Wassenaar Arrangement – multifaceted strategies were assumed as how to control of the eminent threat of MANPADS to the aviation security. These guidelines were adopted by the Organisations for Security and Cooperation in

Europe in 2004. It has improved the airport security a great deal across Europe. The contemporary aviation policies and safety measures must fully consider this wide-ranging display of probable terrorist attacks situations to evaluate the general threat level and to fix the most appropriate and practicable course of action to protect airport security on global level.

### **Bomb attacks**

The bomb attacks on aircraft have increased in the present time (Jenkins, 2015). Protection of the aviation industry against any type of bomb threat is the responsibility of the ground (airport) security (Dempsey, 2002). An effective and economical protection of passengers and aircraft against any potential threat from luggage-borne bombs is essential. In order to reduce the risk of any untoward events, a very consistent search of travellers and freight is required. Intelligence is an important player in the aviation security to ensure a perfect security screening. It is an effective way to daunt the use of bombs in the airplane for the protection of passengers and crew. Explosive and bomb detectors, machine and Sniffex are used in aviation security for the prevention of these threats.

As for protection of the aircraft, a baggage vessel with explosive absorptive creation could be a suitable choice. In this regard many effective tests have been carried out which have established that a possible in-flight baggage bomb blast will not have negative impact on passengers or on the aircraft. The question of expenses of the said construction as well as the airline's curiosity to participate into this mode of protection however remain unanswered.

### **Manpads**

The Shoulder fired Man Portable Air Defence System (MANPADS) are anti-aircraft missiles which are light, easy to transport and fast to unfold. They are used in surface to air strikes (Schóber, Koblen & Szabo, 2012). They can use three types of guidance: infrared, CLOS (command line of site) and laser beam. Widespread use of these weapon system, both by authorized and unauthorized persons, has increased the security risks at regional and global level (Schroeder, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

Overall it appears that BAKIA Peshawar has been directly affected by terrorism incidents occurring in and around it. Protecting the airport appeared as a major security concern that needed prompt action on the part of the authorities. Its geographic location and surrounding environment further pressed for quick measures. There had been a strong realization of the security measures and the concerned official quarter took appropriate measures accordingly.

Some of the security enhancement measures have been adopted at BKIA Peshawar on immediate basis after the different terrorist threats and attacks at

this airport. Such as, the closure of Ababeel Flying has been enforced. All General Aviation Companies operating chartered flights have been issued instructions to allow only Pakistani nationals and as such no foreigners be allowed. Cargo Agents Association and Exporters Association have been requested to co-ordinate with ASF for proper security arrangements. Peshawar Flying Club has also been requested for proper security arrangements in their premises.

The passengers and visitors are mostly disturbed due to these security developments as most of them have to pass through these barriers and manual security checks. An advanced security technological mechanism can improve the situation and give relief to the passengers and visitors. The activities of terrorism have not completely ended in the region. Vigilance and tight security should be taken to combat and eradicate the menace of terrorism from this part of the word.

Pakistan is a developing country and it has to concentrate on the institutional reforms and performance of all the security actors to play their due role for the development of the country and portray a better security picture to the world. The eradication of terrorism and other social evils from this region will obviously contribute to the development of this airport, province and the country at large.

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