

# Climate Activist Group Taking Aim at Air Travel



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Climate activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR) has made no secret of its desire to target air travel. The group has several reasons – ideological and practical – for singling out this means of transportation. XR backers see airports, which have a large environmental impact and big carbon footprint, as a symbol of the unsustainable capitalist system that they are rebelling against. Also, any disruptive protest at an airport, even a short one, will draw increased media attention and help spread recognition of the group's goals. Finally, airports are a critical and vulnerable part of international commerce, and their disruption supports its ultimate objective of overthrowing the current political and economic system.

## Internal Disputes

The group debuted such action at London's Heathrow Airport in June 2019. But disagreement within the movement on disruption tactics emerged around three main points:

- **Safety:** Some XR protesters are deeply concerned that extreme protest activity such as flying drones near airports could endanger passengers. These XR members haven't objected publicly to targeting airports; they just don't want the demonstrations to put aircraft and travelers at risk.
- **Fear of serious criminal charges:** In most European countries, the obstruction of transit systems is a public order offense punishable by fines and short jail sentences. But interfering with the operations of an aircraft for political reasons in most nations can lead to charges of terrorism and far more severe penalties.
- **Public backlash:** Extensive disruption of air travel, especially if it endangers aircraft, could draw an angry rebuke from the public and erode support for XR. While this does not concern some in the group, more moderate members see public sympathy as an important factor.

To target air travel, XR will need to develop tactics that avoid endangering aircraft or drawing severe prosecution. At the same time, those tactics will need to be easily replicable, so its grassroots followers around the globe can also use them.

## Borrowed Tactics

XR is not the first protest campaign to target airports, and it will imitate strategies used by others and seek to come up with its own innovations. The anti-government protest at the Hong Kong International Airport [2] shut down that city's main airport for two days without putting aircraft in danger. XR will likely be looking at the tactics of those protesters for inspiration.

The shutdown of the Hong Kong airport required thousands of highly motivated and organized protesters and, some say, the tacit cooperation of some airport staff. So far, XR has mobilized crowds of a similar size only in the United Kingdom. While its crowds are growing overall, its rallies against airports have been small and have failed to cause a major disruption.

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XR reportedly examined the possibility of using drones against air travel in July, drawing inspiration from a December 2018 incident at London's Gatwick Airport. This strategy reportedly caused a fracture in the group between believers in the XR goal of dismantling capitalism and more recent recruits. On Aug. 29, Heathrow Pause, reportedly an XR splinter group, announced that it would fly toy drones at head height around Heathrow and alert authorities, possibly forcing a halt to airport operations. The group's primary goal appears to be drawing attention to its cause rather than causing disruptions. It is unclear whether Heathrow Pause is an actual XR splinter group or a vanguard group testing drone tactics.

## Innovative Disruption

XR in the United Kingdom and its adherents will continue to experiment with tactics that take aim at air travel and that are easily replicated. Protesters will also look for ways to cause problems on the unsecured side of the airport. The possibilities include blocking entrances and obstructing security checkpoints, main transit routes and check-in counters. XR will seek strategies that can be carried out by a few dozen to a few hundred protesters and that will cause delays lasting from a few hours to a few days.

XR may also expand a tactic previously used against transportation by having small groups of dedicated protesters disrupt road and rail traffic to and from the airport at key chokepoints. Various groups around the world have done this, something that requires only a few dozen well-organized participants and doesn't jeopardize flight safety. While this tactic will hinder travelers and deliveries, it won't halt actual flights. The majority of XR early actions will likely be in the United Kingdom and possibly on the Continent, where the group has a large base of support and numerous targets to choose from, including Paris-Charles de Gaulle Airport and Frankfurt Airport in Germany.

The risk XR poses to air travel is twofold: organized protests and more extreme actions by individuals inspired by its ideology. The majority of XR protesters will likely eschew dangerous tactics, but its rhetoric could lead fringe supporters to act out, for example, by delaying a flight by refusing to be seated or by flying a large drone inside the airport perimeter. So long as these actions don't lead to injuries, XR is unlikely to outright condemn them. Based on XR's protest trajectory, it will likely attempt some kind of demonstration against air travel in October 2019 or during the upcoming holiday season, when traffic is heavier and more vulnerable.

## Referenced Content:

[1] [threat-lens](#)

[2] [hong-kong-despite-lull-violence-city-remains-knife-edge-china](#)