

Aviation terrorism and the Northwest (Delta) flight 253 sabotage attempt:
A new tactic or a form of escalation?

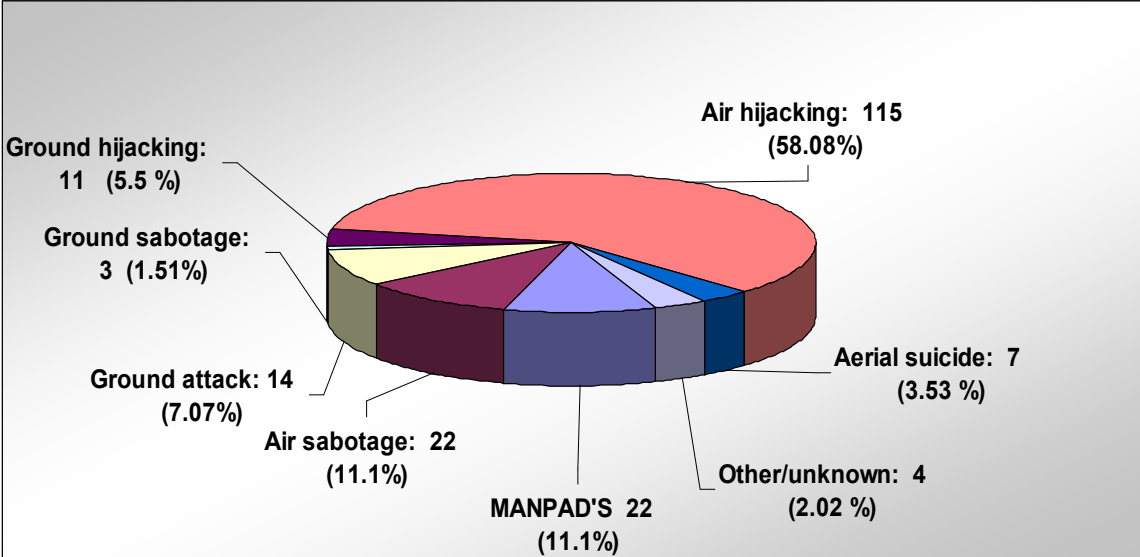
By: Hillel Avihai (PhD.)*

The recent mid-air sabotage attempt by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian 23 years old terrorist of the Northwest (Delta) flight 253 airliner operating from Amsterdam to Detroit (December, 25, 2009), wasn't a surprise for those who are affiliated with aviation security, but certainly was a wake-up call for those who thought that terrorist have neglected the aviation industry.

This article will highlight the type of tactic as was presented by Abdulmutallab i.e.-mid-air sabotage, a tactic which may be categorized an "immediate terrorism" rather than "rolling terrorism", meaning that the escalation of terrorism clearly shows the reduction of hijacking for the purpose of negotiation, a common *modus operandi* of the 1970's ("rolling terrorism") and adopting a tactic where no negotiation is taking part, and the main aim of the terrorist is to blow-up the aircraft at mid-air, causing mega- disaster ("Immediate terrorism").



Making a brief history of the past 40 years (1968-2004) of aviation terrorism, emphasize that of 198 cases of aviation terrorism worldwide [the authors research focused on 'pure terrorism', i.e. the attack was politically orientated, and not for self benefits [terrorism resulted of altruism and not egoism)], 115 cases (58%) were hijacking for negotiation orientation ("rolling terrorism"), compared to 51 cases (25.7%) incidents of "immediate terrorism" such as mid-air sabotage, MANPADS (Man Portable Air Defense System, i.e.: launching shoulder missile for the purpose of destroying the aircraft at mid-air) and suicide mission attack at mid-air.



Source: Avihai,H. PhD dissertation, Anglia Ruskin University (UK),2006



However, focusing on the number of casualties, obviously shows an overturned symmetry, i.e.: the highest number of casualties resulted from immediate terrorism (4697 casualties, including the September 11 2001 attack were the major casualties resulted from the collapse of the twin-towers and the Pentagon crash), compared to 184 casualties resulted from rolling terrorism, i.e. hijacking for negotiation, not to mention that of 184 casualties, the major fatalities resulted from poor rescue attempt, such as the Egypt-Air Flight 648 hijacking to Malta (23 November 1985) by Abu Nidal organization (ANO), where more than 50 passengers lost their life, following the poor rescue attempt by the Egyptian Commando ("777 unit").

So what has changed in the past 40 years, regarding aviation terrorism? Did the latest mid-air sabotage plot represent a new comeback, or just another attempt to attack the civilian aircraft by using a well-known tactic?

It is clear, that analyzing aviation terrorism attacks since the late 1960's will emphasize that indeed there is an escalation of the attack.



The question is: does the type of attack is affiliated with certain terrorist organization, and, if mid-air sabotage is a well known tactic, what was in the recent attack that caused the aviation industry to be surprised, (again)?

It seems that both issues mentioned above are joined together, and escalation of the attack can be expressed for example, by a technological modification of certain explosive, as was emphasized by the Astrolite explosive which were carried aboard by Abdulmutallab, hidden in his underwear.

Yet, to address to the first issue, some assumptions as to a potential escalation may be suggested:

1. Escalation as a natural process:

Terrorists need to escalate their violence because yesterday's headlines about a bomb hidden in a trash bin are today's marginal event that might not receive the appropriate media coverage as it did previously. As Hans Joachim Klein, one of Carlos' colleagues defined as 'force of habit', meaning that terrorists must escalate their activities in order to be noticed: 'If I escalate, it means that I operate', a familiar equivalent to Descartes' well known proverb: '*I think, therefore I am*'. In other words, terrorists operate within an inherent escalation framework in order to justify their existence. The organization (as well as the individual) should escalate the acts in order to attract publicity - the oxygen for terrorists.



2. Accessibility to explosives:

The spread of plastic explosives (such as Semtex, RDX, C-4), which are easy to get on black markets enables terrorists to extend the severity of the attacks. The Semtex explosive, for example, was widely distributed during the 1970s by the Czechoslovakian regime to Eastern- orientated states such as Libya and Syria as well as to terrorist organizations. It is worthwhile mentioning that an amount of 350 grams was sufficient to blow up Pan-Am Flight 103 in mid-air (December 1988).

The enormous amount of Semtex, as well as its accessibility to terrorists was addressed by former Czech President Vaclav Havel, following his visit to Britain in 1990, when he stated that *'...If you consider that 200 grams is enough to blow up an aircraft... this means world terrorism has enough Semtex to last 150 years...'* (Frankel, 1990)¹.

Not only the access to explosives may be a potential explanation for the escalation in attacks, but also daily-used instruments may also be used to construct powerful explosives such as the Casio wristwatch which was used as a detonator by Ramzi Yousef, in his attempt to sabotage the Philippine Airline Jumbo jet (Flight PAL 434, 11 December 1994).

Furthermore, accessibility to explosives or bomb components is related also to the use of legal and 'innocent' ingredients that may be purchased in any shop supplying agricultural or chemical products, such as Urea Nitrate used by Ramzi Yousef in 1993 in conjunction with Diesel fuel, intending to destroy the WTC in 1993, TATP (Triacetone Triperoxide) may be produced by Hydrogen Peroxide which one can buy in a pharmacy; similarly, Acetone (paint-thinner) is available in every hardware store, so there is no need to invest efforts in obtaining Semtex, RDX or C-4 .



3. Accessibility to knowledge and technology:

The Internet offers unlimited accessibility to knowledge in manufacturing home-made explosives. Clicking the value 'Semtex' using Google, one may see how easy it is to produce this explosive. The suicide bombers in the London Underground attacks (July 2005) used peroxide and nails to build the bombs following instructions which were available on the Internet; Richard Reid, the Shoe Bomber claimed that he had used the Internet to build his TATP home made explosives hidden in his shoes, and the recent attempt (10 August 2006) was the plot to cause the simultaneous destruction in mid air of six to ten American jets bound for the US from the UK, using Astrolite-G liquid bomb, considered as the '*non-nuclear most powerful explosive*'. This explosive was used by Abdulmutallab, on board the Northwest (Delta) flight 253 airliner.

It is worthwhile mentioning, that not high-cost sophisticated instruments are the issue, but rather the accessibility to daily-used components and the *knowledge* of how to convert a radio controlled toy into a powerful bomb.

Hence, accessibility to everyday instruments together with the knowledge of explosives-building, offers more and more opportunities for more and more terrorists.



The access to knowledge may also be connected to the 11 September attack, because the terrorist pilots learned how to fly by graduating from a private flying school. Every person can purchase a Flight Simulator, not only of a Cessna 172 but also of Boeing jets. Thus, accessibility to knowledge is not related only to knowledge of explosives, but also to everyday technologies which may be used to commit a terrorists attack. Just for the record: a stolen Cessna or a hired crop duster loaded with 100 Kilograms of biological weapons such as Anthrax, which may cause the death of 500,000 people Hence, accessibility to knowledge combined with technological instrument (small airplane) is a multi-threat cocktail...

5. State sponsors of terrorism:

The US *'Patterns of Global Terrorism'* indicates states that actively sponsor terrorist organizations, such as Iran, North Korea (for example: at least three mid-air sabotage incidents were related to the support of North Korea, among them- the Korean Air bombing of 1987 by two North-Korean agents). Sudan and Syria and, the latest actor: Yemen, which, according to US officials, enabled Al Qaida to train its terrorists, with regard to the Northwest flight 253 Plot, all these countries play an active role in hosting and /or supporting terrorists infrastructures.



6. The "Balloon Effect":

When metal detectors were introduced during the early 1970s following the hijackings to/from Cuba, terrorists had to search for other alternatives, if hijacking becomes difficult to conduct, and then terrorists seek other alternatives, such as sabotage or using MANPADS. While the security measures of the 1970s were aimed at detecting metals such as knives and pistols usually carried by hijackers, airlines should shift priorities and focus on attempts at sabotage, and when sophisticated detectors aimed at detecting plastic explosives are used, terrorists will seek another tactic, such as MANPADS (Parker and Ottaway, 1989; Carley, 1991, Marx, 1991).²

7. The presence of fundamentalist-religious orientated terrorist organizations: Another explanation that may explain the escalation in aerial terrorism, meaning that moving from 'rolling action' such as using the aircraft as a bargaining chip to an 'immediate action' (i.e. Attacking the aircraft with no intention to bargain) such as ground attack, sabotage or MANPADS, may be related to the rise of fundamentalist religious terrorism of the early 1980s, mainly fundamental Islamic.

Yet, this assumption should be historically tested, due to the fact that sabotaging airliners became a practical evidence since the early 1970's, taking for example Ahmed Jibrils' organization (PFLP-GC, a secular-orientated organization), who, unlike Habash and Hadads' hijacking for negotiation tactic, Jibril's specialization was sabotaging the aircraft by using barometric devices such as in the cases of the Austrian Caravelle airliner and the Swissair Convair airliner (21 February 1970); or the El-Al Boeing 707 sabotage attempt (16 August 1972, using 2 unwitting English passengers).



As proven, escalation in terms of sabotaging the airliner was not invented by Bin Laden, since as proven, the aforementioned tactics which are related to the 'immediate action' such as sabotage or MANPADS had started 30 years before the name 'Al Qaida' became relevant.

If one accepts the understanding that mid-air sabotage represents a clear trend in escalation since this tactic is considered as 'immediate action' (no negotiation with the terrorists) rather than 'rolling action'(negotiating process), then *fundamentalist* Islam was not the main reason for escalation. It had started years before. As mentioned above, it is important to emphasize that although Ahmed Jibril's orientation was secular (Marxist-Leninist affiliation), his willingness to cause immediate-action attacks such as mid-air sabotage proves that one cannot attribute the escalation in aerial terrorist operations *exclusively* to the rise of *fundamentalist* Islam.

On the other hand, there is a characteristic which may link the escalation with fundamentalist- religious terrorist organizations in the sense of terrorists' willingness to sacrifice their lives in return for a promise of eternal life in heaven, a practice that was first announced (although never proven to be their real intention) by the terrorists in the TWA hijacking to Beirut by Shite Amal (June 1985). Later, during the Air France hijacking by GIA (December 1994), it was evident that the terrorists' plan was to crash the Airbus jet into the Eiffel Tower, and the first *actually* carried out suicide mission attack was the 11 September 2001.



An analysis of the terrorists' (mainly Palestinian) tactics in the late 1960s and 1970s, demonstrates the fact that the terrorists did not *intentionally* sacrifice their own lives: the 1972 sabotage attempt of the El-Al Boeing 707 by the PFLF-GC, the Strella-missile planned attack against the El-Al Boeing 707 in Rome airport (September 1973); the TWA sabotage (1974) again, by jibrils' PFLP-GC; the El-Al Jumbo sabotage attempt (1986) by an unwitting passenger; the Lockerbie disaster (1988) and the UTA sabotage (1989) - all of these cases were characterized by the absence of *intentional* suicide, and were carried out either by using an unwitting passenger or by planting the bomb on board and disembarking at the next destination.

The only exceptional incident where the willingness to die was evident was Kozo Okomoto's attack at Lod Airport on May 1972, when he declared that after he and his two comrades died, they would become stars of Orion. However, this belief was suggested *post-factum*, meaning during Okomotos' investigation, and not during the incident itself. Yet, besides this incident, secular terrorists, mainly Palestinians, did not follow the 'path to Heaven' ideology, but rather preferred to live after the attack.

Unlike this type of operation, religious-fundamentalist Islamic terrorism is characterized by willingness to deliberately sacrifice one's life. This practice may increase the atrocity of the operation by the large number of victims *outside* the aircraft, as was demonstrated in the 11 September attack, where the largest number of victims resulted from the collision into the WTC and the Pentagon. Of approximately 2694 civilians, less than 10 per cent (246 victims) were on board the four aircraft.



Yet this type of operation indicates another aspect of escalation, such as abandoning the hijacking orientated fashion and adopting the strategic agent orientation, meaning that the civilian aircraft and its passengers on board are not the only and final target such as in a case of sabotaging, but rather using it as a strategic means, aimed at crashing it into selected or strategic elements (such as the WTC, Pentagon, etc.).

The secular terrorism during the late 1960s and 1970s was characterized by a nationalist agenda, especially if we focus on the PFLP, which is considered as mainly responsible for the rise of aerial terrorism in the Middle East during the previous decades. If one analyses the PFLP statements or follows Khaled's statements carefully, one may see a pragmatic point of view: '*... We do not glorify death...we are not fighting for death... we want to live...*' (Khaled, 2002)³.

The rise of fundamentalist terrorist organizations, mainly Shia extremists who emerged from the Iranian revolution of Khomeini (1979), and later the presence of Suni involvement in aviation terrorism following Bin Laden's declaration of war against the 'Infidels', point to a possible linkage between escalation and the role of fundamentalist religious terrorist groups in aviation terrorism, but focusing on the element of self-sacrifice or, to put it aviation terminology: the passenger(terrorist) buys a one-way ticket to an unknown destination (hell or heaven...)



While secular organizations use terrorism for the achievement of pragmatic-national objectives, ultra religious terrorists view their role as God's messengers, fulfilling spiritual commands. This is especially true of Al- Qaida, which speaks in terms of a holy war against the Crusaders. For Al-Qaida, hijacking an aircraft for the sake of negotiation is far less attractive than using it as a flying bomb or planting bombs in a dozen Jumbo jets.

If the potential number of victims of secular terrorism is counted in dozens or in hundreds, the potential number of victims resulting from ultra-religious terrorism (mainly fundamentalist Islamic terrorism) is counted in thousands. It may be argued that the aerial terrorism of the 1970s was less destructive than the aerial terrorism at the beginning of the third millennium, especially when realizing that 57.7 per cent of all 198 cases of aviation terrorism incidents between 1968 to 2004 were hijackings ('rolling action'), which caused 184 casualties, most of them, as mentioned, resulting from a poor commando raid assault.

Yet, there is an important issue that should be emphasized, with regard to aviation terrorism of the third millennium: the element of 'spillover', meaning that one can see that Secular orientated terrorists organization adopt radical terrorists organization tactic, especially regarding the use of terrorists who intestinally sacrifice their life such as in the case of sabotaging 2 Russian jets by 2 Chechenian female terrorists, who got on board the twin Tupolev jets of Sibir Airlines and Volga-Avia Airlines (24 August 2004) with Plastic explosives belt (probably RDX) well-hidden under their clothing. The Chechenian terrorists are national-Muslim orientated, rather than fundamentalist Muslim unlike Al Qaida or Hezbollah.



This fact should be emphasized, alerting aviation security sources that escalation is not a monopoly of fundamentalist terrorists but also other terrorists with less radical agendas but more nationalist ideology adopt these tactics if they believe that sabotaging an airliner by explosive hidden in a suitcase or using a suicide bomber, may promote their political or nationalistic objectives.

Summery:

As discussed, the element of escalation is not related exclusively to the fundamentalist-religious ideological terrorism, regarding the aviation terrorism of the third millennium. Indeed, secular terrorism of the 1970s was not identified with the suicide phenomenon, but something has changed in the past decade: sabotage or suicide bombers may rise from secular terrorist organizations too.

Back to fundamentalist terrorist organizations: The 'aerial suicide' phenomenon, as is evident in the 11 September attack and later by Richard Reid (the 'shoe bomber', December 2001) represents a major difference in operation in the sense of unconditional willingness to commit suicide on behalf of God's commandment. Negotiation is excluded from the terrorists' lexicon. This fact should be taken into decision makers considerations.



¹ Frankel Glenn(1990) 'Sale of Explosive to Libya Detailed', Washington Post, March 23.

In:Hoffman (1999) 'Terrorism trend and Prospects' footnote no 17, p. 14

² Joseph W. Marx, " US Strategy toward Aviation Security: A New Look" in: Barry Rubin, "Terrorism and Politics", London: MacMillan, 1991 pp.99-121

³ Leila Khaled, Hijacked by Destiny" interview to Arab News, October 17, 2002 in:
<http://archives.econ.utah.edu>.

*Dr. Hillel Avihai holds a Ph.D. Degree in aviation terrorism in the discipline of Politics and international relations from the Anglia Ruskin (Polytechnic) University (UK), and has joined the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya (ICT) as a research member. Dr. Avihai specializes in the phenomenon of global aviation terrorism while investigating the sources and motives of this phenomenon, likewise, analyzing significant events and examining human and technological measures designed to confront the escalation of this phenomenon , as expressed on the events of September 11, the significant event that marked the passing from hijacking airplanes for the sake of negotiation (“rolling terror”) to using airplanes as a strategic emissary to crash them into designated targets (“immediate terror”).