

Aviation terrorism: from bargaining chip to a the strategic agent

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Analyzing the general characteristics of aviation terrorism from the late 1960s to the 1980s, shows that the major role of the aircraft was emphasized by a combination of two main elements. The first was the rationality factor which was expressed in the release of prisoners resulting from a terrorist attack aimed at achieving politically-orientated objectives, such as occurred *inter alia*, in the El-Al hijacking of July 1968. The second element was the publicity, which was the hallmark of the TWA hijacking on August 1969 by Leila Khaled, and perhaps the most significant event which establishes this proposed assumption- the Dawson Field incident of September 1970.

This assumption is based on the hijacking-for-negotiation tactic, which was the most familiar tactic of aviation terrorism during the late 1960s and until the late 1970s. Except for a few cases (mainly aerial terrorist acts of the early 1970s conducted by the Jibril's PFLP-GC), the terrorists' main demand was to exchange prisoners as well as attracting worldwide attention. Following a question addressed to Leila Khaled during an interview for the *Washington Times* as to the purpose of the hijacking, she was stated as saying:

The objective was to free prisoners, and to bring the world's attention to the Palestinian cause...Look, I had orders to seize the plane, not to blow it up. I am no Kamikaze pilot. I care about people. If I had wanted to blow up the plane, no one could have prevented me'.¹

However, this 'gentle' mode of hijacking seems to have become an archaic tactic, converting the hostages from being pawns on the terrorism chess board to dispensable targets, which is emphasized by the transformation from 'rolling action' to 'immediate action'.

'Immediate action' which includes ground attack, ground or air sabotage, MANPADS attack and suicide mission attacks are characterized by the fact that no negotiation was taking place within the latter *mode* of air terrorism, unlike 'rolling terrorism' which refers

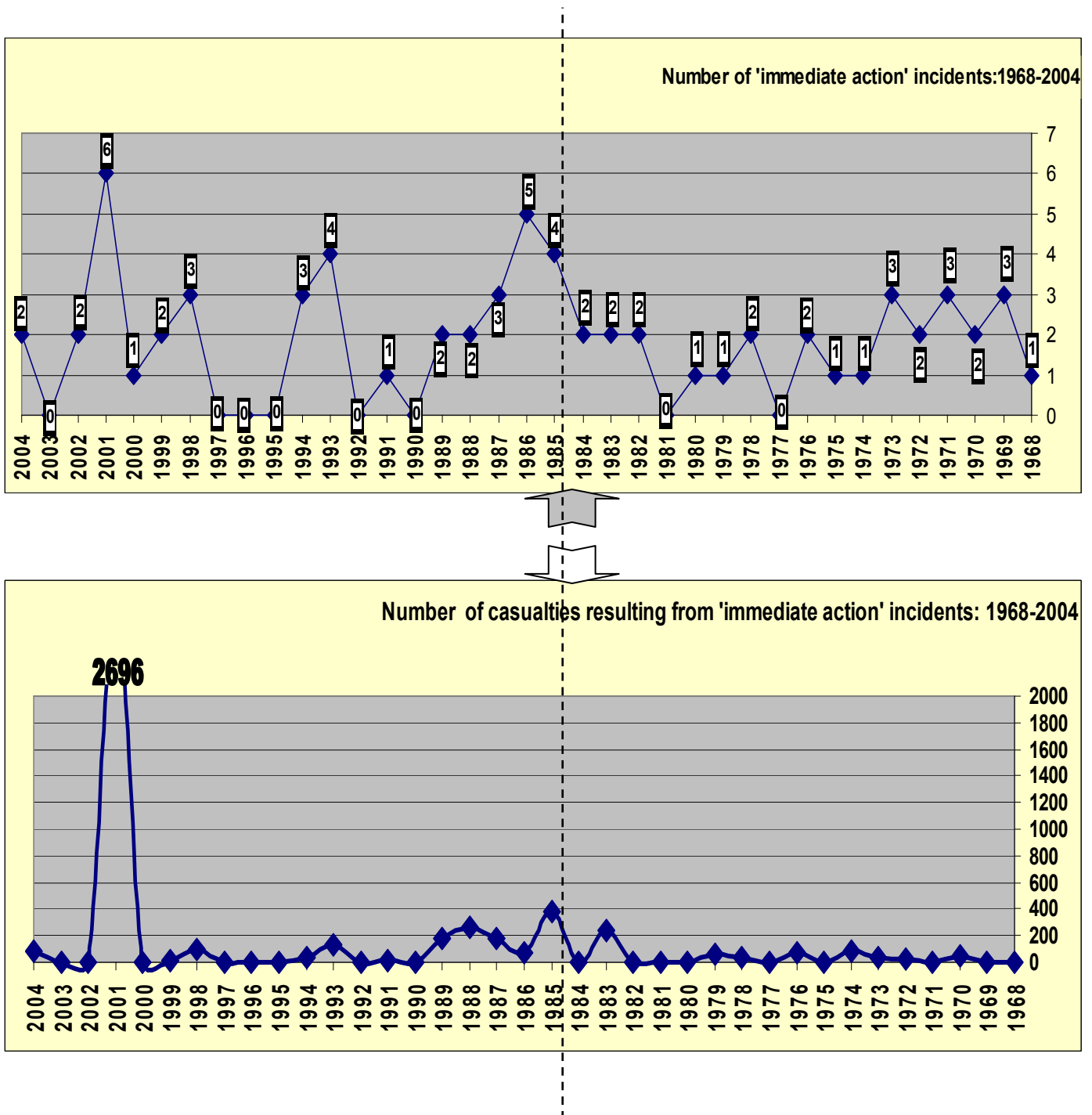
to a negotiation process where the hostages were released after the release of jailed terrorists.

The practice of abandoning the hostage exchange tactic and moving to an 'immediate action' tactic is indicated by the following figure.

Distribution of 'immediate action' incidents 1968-2004:

'Fundamentalist period'

'Moderate period'



Despite the dramatic increase of 'immediate action' incidents as presented in the figure above (left side), the number of casualties has not increased dramatically, except for in the 11 September attacks. This evidence can be explained by the fact that some of the counted 'immediate action' casualties are not known, such as in the case of the Orbi Georgian Airways Tupolev 134 MANPADS attack (20 September 1993).

Another explanation is that the figure above includes failed attempts, such as the *Nezar Hindawi* case, (17 April 1986); the Air-India flight 301 sabotage attempt where the bomb exploded at Narita airport or the TWA mid-air sabotage (2 April 1986) with only four casualties. Should the aircraft have exploded, the number of casualties would have reached more than a hundred. The same is true of Richard Reid's attempt to blow up the American Airlines Boeing 767 in mid-air (22 December 2001). In other words, the figure above indicates the unquestionable dramatic rise of 'immediate action' incidents.

Regarding the number of casualties, the figure indicates *actual* casualties rather than potential casualties. It is obvious that the terrorists who committed the 'immediate action' attack were aiming at causing mass casualties, otherwise they would have chosen a 'softer' tactic, such as hijacking. As indicated, the impact of immediate action, adopting the aerial suicide mission, represents the mass-casualty potential of such a tactic, as shown by Al-Qaeda on the 11 September 2001.

From this point of view, it would be worthwhile dividing the term 'immediate action' into two. The first is sabotaging the aircraft or downing it with MANPADS, and the second is using the aircraft as a guided missile to be crashed into selected targets. As to the former tactic, it is a practice that was generally linked to secular terrorist organizations, such as the PFLP-GC, UNITA, the Sikh terrorists (who are not defined as 'fundamentally religious'), and North Korean terrorists who definitely are not labeled as 'fundamentalist religious terrorists', and also state-involvement such as in the cases of Libya (the Pan-Am sabotage) and Syria (the 'Nezar Hindawi' case, April 1986).

As to the PFLP-GC, one may argue that Jibril's cooperation with the Iranians in the late 1980s may represent a fundamentalist affiliation. This argument has no solid ground, since Jibril was the first Palestinian to adopt the sabotage tactic using barometric triggers, in which he specialized. In that period, (early 1970s), there was no

fundamental –Islamic influence since the Iranian revolution started only in 1979, so the general affiliation of the PFLP-GC was secular, mainly Marxist-Leninist- orientated.

Focusing on MANPADS, this tactic was adopted by fundamentalist -religious terrorists such as Al-Qaeda only in the third millennium, first in the Mombassa incident (2002) and later in Iraq (DHL cargo Airbus in 2003). From this point of view, one may find reinforcement to Wilkinson's (2001) argument as to the role of secular terrorism in terrorist activities. Yet, as these tactics were adopted by fundamentalist -religious terrorist organizations, such as the Ramzi Yousef's 'Bojinka' plot to use a dozen US airliners and blow them up in mid-air (Bergman, 2006), one has to consider the magnitude of the plan regarding the potential number of casualties that could have resulted should this plan have been executed ².

As emphasized in latest events, religious terrorist attacks causes a far higher casualty potential than in secular terrorism due to the spiritual-fundamentalist ideology which is characterized by far more objectives than national liberation objectives.

In addition, fundamentalist ideology contains a philosophy which deals with culture clash, and therefore it is more global rather than a fight for liberation of a specific territory. Therefore, the combination of spiritual belief and global philosophy makes religious terrorism far more dangerous than a national liberation struggle.

This fact was emphasized by Hoffman (1998) arguing that in 1995 for example, 25 per cent of total international terrorist attacks were conducted by religious – fundamentalist terrorist groups which caused 58 per cent of all casualties that same year ³.

On the other hand, it is worthwhile mentioning that fundamentalist -religious terrorist organizations also used 'traditional tactics' such as hijacking, as in the case of the TWA flight 847 hijacking to Beirut (June 1985), or the hijacking of the Air-India Airbus by the HUM-'Harakat ul-Mujahidin' (24 December 1999). These organizations are fundamentalist-Islamic orientated and the latter is a member of Osama Bin Laden's international Islamic front, and despite this fact the tactic was a 'rolling action'(hijacking) rather than 'immediate action' (total destruction by using the aircraft as a flying missile ⁴.

Actual evidence show that the practice of using the aircraft as a flying missile is *exclusively* affiliated with the fundamentalist religious terrorism framework (regarding its practical evidence rather than theoretical speculations).

Although the first to crash an aircraft into a strategic target were the Japanese Kamikaze ['Divine Wind'] during the Second World War, yet, this was not considered as terrorism, since it was aiming against military infrastructure. Another incident was an attempt rather than an *actual* suicide mission in 1972 in what is considered as a criminally-orientated hijacking of the Southern Airways jet en route from Birmingham, Alabama (USA) to Montgomery, when the hijackers threatened to crash the Boeing 727 into the nuclear reactor at Oak Ridge. Yet these incidents are not terrorist -orientated events, so Bin Ladens attack of 2001 is the first ever example of using an aircraft as a flying missile.

Regarding aerial terrorism *per-se*, previous incidents showed some evidence as to the terrorists' *intentions* to use the aircraft as a flying missile, such as in the TWA Boeing 727 hijacking to Beirut by Amal/Hezbollah (June 1985), where there were rumors that the terrorists had plans to crash the jet following Beirut airport's refusal to permit the jet to land, and the terrorists announced that they were 'suicide terrorists' and they would crash the jet into the Ba'abda presidential palace. The same is true of the Pan-Am hijacking by Abu Nidal on 5 September 1986, where it was *believed* that the terrorists intended to crash the Jumbo jet into the center of Tel- Aviv.

Lastly, there was the El-Al hijacking attempt by college student Taufik Fukra (18 November 2002), who told the Turkish interrogators he had planned to divert the jet back to Tel-Aviv and crash it into a building, in imitation of the attacks on the World Trade Centre ⁵.

Since these cases are more likely to be regarded as a possibility since it is difficult to determine the terrorists' real intentions, the aforementioned threats may be categorized more as theoretical rather than substantial. As to the latter event of Taufik Fukra, the theoretical assumption as to his intention to crash the jet into a building in Tel-Aviv seems to be more a wishful thinking rather than a solid intention, since the hijacking event occurred as the aircraft was approaching Istanbul. Should the terrorist have had the intention of crashing the aircraft into Tel-Aviv, he could have tried to do so after

take off from Tel-Aviv. It seems that the incident and its consequences are more likely to be related to the imitation/inspiration element rather than an actual suicide mission. The first solid evidence of terrorists planning to crash a hijacked jet into a strategic target was the Air France hijacking by the GIA (December 1994), when it was discovered that the terrorists had intentions to crash the jet into the Eiffel Tower, after having first landed in Marseilles. This argument is based on the fact that the terrorists demanded the refueling of the Airbus jet with 27 tons of fuel, when only a third of this amount was needed for the short flight from Marseilles to Paris. In addition, one of the terrorist leaders admitted later that indeed the intention had been to crash the jet into the Eiffel Tower. But as emphasized previously, the first *proven* evidence in using the aircraft as a flying missile was the 11 September attack of 2001, conducted by nineteen suicide terrorists.

Relying on solid evidence, it is possible to assume that this new type of operation in using the aircraft as a flying missile alongside a deliberate intention of suicide is connected exclusively to the fundamentalist religious terrorists, in this case, Al-Qaeda. Deliberate suicide, involving also the deaths of many others, was first demonstrated in ancient times following Samson's last statement: *'Let me die with the Philistines'*⁶. Ironically, the action of Samson was replaced by those of the terrorists and the Philistines by western citizens. Religious terrorism may offer the justification for mass murder as well as the manifestation of self-sacrifice (in Arabic; *'Istishad'*), while the use of aerial terrorism during the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by the absence of terrorists' self-sacrifice.

The latest evidence of abandoning the traditional tactic and adopting the tactic of using the aircraft as a flying missile became a potential threat only in the 1990s, but with actual practice in the third millennium (i.e. the September 2001 attack). This may be related to the fact that terrorists' are more and more willing to blow-up the aircraft over a strategic target in a deliberate suicide operation.

Al-Qaeda has not neglected its efforts to view the civilian aircraft as an immediate target. The willingness to commit suicide emphasizes the idea that the 'immediate action' will be characterized by using the aircraft as a flying missile. An Islamic Internet site related to Al-Qaeda (June 2004) has published the threat to target American as well as western aircraft following the message that anything related to the Crusaders'

infrastructure, bases and transportation facilities will be the main focus [of Al-Qaeda] of the next operations '*...with the help of Allah!*'⁷

This threat has received supporting evidence during October 2005, when the White House published a list of plots that were foiled, such as '*The West Coast Airliner Plot*' intended to attack targets on the West Coast of the US in mid 2002 using hijacked aircraft. One of the plotters was involved in the planning of the September 11 attack, or '*The East Coast Airliner Plot*' intended to attack targets on the East Coast in mid 2003 using hijacked commercial aircraft and '*The Heathrow plot*' intended to attack Heathrow Airport during 2003 for the purpose of hijacking an aircraft and crashing it into one of London's sky-scrapers⁸.

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that immediate action attacks characterized by the use of the aircraft as a strategic agent together with deliberate suicide will be the monopoly of fundamentalist –religious terrorists. If the Chechnyans, the Tamil Tigers and the Kurdish PKK adopt the culture of suicide, one may see that once fundamentalist-religious terrorist groups have proved to have no limits in their activities, it is more likely that other terrorist groups, secular as well as religious, will adopt the 'suicide culture' practice. If the Chechnyans and the Tamil Tigers use men and women as suicide bombers, why not transfer this tactic towards the aviation field? Hence, imitation and escalation are integral elements within terrorism in general and aviation terrorism in particular.

The presence of fundamentalist-religious terrorism regarding aviation terrorism, as argued previously, became evident on 11 September 2001, and was followed by Al-Qaeda's activist Richard Reid who attempted to blow up the American Airlines jet in mid-air (December 2001), as well as a series of plots during 2002 and 2003 to use the aircraft as an agent for the purpose of causing mass-murder resulting in total destruction of the aircraft.

These facts clearly answer the research question as to the shifting mode of the civilian aircraft from an objective to a strategic agent, inferring that the purpose is not just to sabotage or down the aircraft, but to increase casualty potential by using the jet as a flying missile in a deliberate suicide mission, a practice that is currently exclusive to fundamentalist-religious terrorism.

This issue may be shifted to another aircraft aspect, which is the future role of cargo aircraft. Regarding Al-Qaeda's mode of using the aircraft as a strategic agent, an interesting issue was pointed out by Rabkin (2004), managing Director of the Homeland Security and Justice Issues, following his testimony before the US Senate, claiming that the 11 September terrorists were studying the possible use of crop dusters to spread biological or chemical agents⁹.

This means, first used by the *Aum Shinri kyo* (20 March 1995) highlights the possibility of shifting terrorism from the traditional role of the aircraft to a new stage of atrocity, by using the aircraft as an agent for the distribution of WMD. The adoption of 'immediate *mega* action' rather than 'rolling action' reinforces the understanding that the traditional terrorist method of using the passengers as a bargaining chip or using negotiation tactics in order to achieve goals is becoming less and less a common practice.

By shifting to 'immediate action', neither negotiation nor passengers as a bargaining chip have a role within this new action. Following the suggested assumption that involves abandoning hostage taking and using them as a bargaining chip towards using the aircraft as a target (bombing) or as a strategic agent (flying missile), the hijacked cargo jet may be used as a means for the spread of WMD.

This point of view as to the likelihood of terrorists focusing on cargo aircraft in the sense of hijacking a cargo jet not for the purpose of bargaining but rather as a platform to cause tremendous potential destruction is reinforced by the 'disappearance' of an old Boeing 727 jet from Luanda airport in Angola on 25 May 2003, raising concerns as to the possibility that the jet would find its way to a fanatical terrorist organization which could easily convert the jet into a biological flying missile¹⁰.

The possibility of using the aircraft as a flying missile (or using it as an agent for the purpose of spreading WMD) may be evident by the use of private airplanes rather than large commercial jets, where terrorists will seek to use private airplanes where security measures are loose, strengthening the balloon effect: when security measures after the September 11 attack were extensively strengthened, then terrorists seek the weak link, and private airplanes, which may be capable of spreading WMD or may be loaded with explosives to be crashed into selected targets, may become a possible

scenario, leaving large commercial jets for different and known tactics such as sabotage or MANPADS attack.

Recent evidence shows that the LTTE have managed to acquire an aircraft from East Europe and bring it to Sri-Lanka after preparing a landing field. This fact was raised by Bahkutumbi Raman, director of the *Institute for Topical Studies* in India, following the ICT's conference for counter-terrorism, 2005. This aircraft may well be used as a flying missile controlled by a suicide bomber. In addition, one may see that terrorists started focusing on other types of aircraft: small, or even the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). According to Israeli officials, some UAV's ('Ultra-Light') were captured in Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah ('The Muqatah') by the Israeli forces during the 'Al Aksa Intifada' (ICT, 2005). In other words, the aircraft although not necessarily a commercial passenger jet, may be used as an agent for a mega attack. If one accepts the assumption that terrorists will shift their tactic and may be using the [cargo] aircraft as an agent by hijacking it, then Hoffman's argument indeed plays a significant role regarding the threat potential to cargo aircraft.

Summary:

This article referred to a possible shifting mode from hijacking-for-bargaining towards a strategic agent *modus*, which was first carried out on 11 September 2001, where the main aim of the terrorists was to use the hijacked aircraft as a flying missile, causing mass-murder.

As argued, aircraft remain a high priority target for terrorists. Unlike terrorist attacks on commercial-passenger aircraft, recent threats extended terrorists' focus onto private aircraft, not necessarily because such an aircraft may symbolize the 'enemy's' entity, but also because it may be a useful agent for the purpose of distributing WMD or loading it with explosives and crashing it into selected targets, alongside with its tremendous impact on various fields of social order.

¹ Leila Khaled, The Washington Times, July 21, 2003 Available in:

<http://washingtontimes.com/upi-breaking/20030721-082110-7107r.htm>{August 22, 2003}

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- ² Paul Wilkinson,(2001) "Terrorism Versus Democracy', London: Frank-Cass.
- ³ Hoffman, B. (1998) *Inside Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- ⁴ <http://www.ict.org.il>, 23 August 2003
- ⁵ 'Hijacker wanted a re-run of Sept 11 aimed to fly into Israel' in: The Guardian Unlimited, Nov. 19, 2002; Ben David, A. (2005) 'The Aircraft hijacker landed in Israel and arrested' *Yedioth Ahronoth* , 22 September:27
- ⁶ Holy Bible, Judges, Chapter 16, Sentence 30
- ⁷ *Yedioth Ahronoth* , June 9, 2004, p. 4
- ⁸ <http://www.whitehouse.gov>,7 October 2005; Associated Press, 2006.
- ⁹ US General Accounting Office (GAO), 'Aviation Security: Improvement Still Needed in Federal Aviation Security Efforts': Statement of Norman J.Rabkin, Managing Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues (GAO-04-592T),March 30, 2004. p.18
- ¹⁰ G.L. Dillinghton ,United States General Accounting Office(GAO-03-1150T), 'Aviation Security: Progress Since September 11, 2002, and the Challenges Ahead', September 2003, Introduction page. (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d031150t.pdf>); Susanna Dokupil, 'Rethinking the Airline Bailout'(National Security White Papers, 2004) available in: <http://www.fed-soc.org/Publications/Terrorism/airlinebailout.htm>; Arie Egozi, "The Fear: Flying Atomic Bomb(Hebrew), *Yedioth Ahronoth* , July 21, 2003, p. 6