

Between Two Septembers:

From the bargaining chip of 6 September 1970 to a strategic agent of 11 September 2001

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When George Habash was elated over his hijackings success of the late 1960s and early 70s, he was interviewed by the German newspaper, *Der Stern*, and declared, '...*'When we hijack a plane it has more effect than if we killed a hundred Israelis in battle'*.

The general tactic of aviation terrorism at that time, i.e., the late 1960s (excluding asylum seekers, which is not pure terrorism) up to the early 1980s, represented a similar modus: hijacking the aircraft, raising politically-oriented demands such as prisoner release alongside raising a political frustration, which offered the terrorists some amount of publicity, and finally releasing the hostages (either as a result of negotiation, or as a result of an armed assault on the aircraft, as was demonstrated at the Sabena hijacking (May 1972; the Air France hijacking to Entebbe (July 1976); the Lufthansa hijacking to Mogadishu (October 1977) etc.

From the terrorists perspective, the aircraft in most cases was used as a bargaining chip as well as raising the political issue as was emphasized by Leila Khaled's hijackings: the first was the successful, TWA hijacking on December 1969, while the other (El-Al, 6 September 1970) although was foiled, emphasized Habash's philosophy. In her autobiography, Khaled stated, in regard to the TWA hijacking, that...*' 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 '.*ⁱⁱ

Khaled's and Arguello's attempt to hijack the El-Al Boeing 707 flight 219 (6 September 1970) emphasized Khaled's intentions, when it was discovered that the firing pins hand grenades were filed down, meaning that the *intentional* plan was that the grenades would *not* to explode. This fascinating fact reinforces Khaled's constant argument that the order she received was not to blow up the jet while passengers were on board.

The Dawson's field incident, which took place 31 years before the September 11th attack, raises some critical issues regarding airlines' and states' attitude regarding aviation terrorism. Mainly due to the fact that even in the early 70's, there was evidence (although aviation terrorism was in marginal numbers compared to hijackings) that the aircraft became the target itself, rather than just a bargaining chip. Perhaps the most known incident of the sabotage tactic, was carried out by the Palestinian terrorist Ahmed Jibril, leader of the PFLP-GC, who demonstrated his ability by sabotaging the aircraft in midair, in most cases using barometric detonators (Swissair sabotage, February 1970; El Al sabotage attempt, August 1972).

As it seems, the Dawson's 'quadrojacking' incident, may be regarded as the seeds of the other September incident, this time by demonstrating the other tactic: abandoning 'traditional' tactics, such as hijacking and in some cases- sabotage, and adopting the 'strategic agent' modus, i.e., using the aircraft not as a bargaining chip, but rather using the hijacked jet as a flying missile and crashing it into selected targets, mainly target which symbolizes the 'enemy's' icons.

A close look at databases and aviation terrorism events from September 1970 until September 2001, clearly shows a shifting mode regarding terrorist tactics: less hijackings', more sabotaging or deliberate crashing, which is perhaps related to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism operating

under a spiritual faith. Perhaps the first, and most well solid evidence, as to terrorists intentions of shifting the tactic from bargaining to crashing, was demonstrated in the Air France hijacking (December 1994) by the GIA (Armed Islamic Group), where it was discovered that the terrorist's intentions were to crash an Airbus jet with the passengers on-board, over Paris, most likely into the Eiffel Tower. This solid evidence (unlike other incidents, where terrorists threats to crash the jet which were theoretically based assumptions, such as in the case of the TWA hijacking to Beirut in June 1985), clearly show that terrorists have abandon the traditional tactic and escalating the threat, with no appropriate defensive measures or preventive steps taken by Western authorities.

In September of 1970 four Western aircrafts were hijacked. All of them were blown up after releasing the passengers and crew. On September 2001, four American aircraft were hijacked and crashed into the selected targets with the passengers and crew on board. For 31 years decision makers could have done much more in order to elevate aviation security measures. From this point of view, it was not Bin Laden's genius, but rather the world's impotency by avoiding a multitude of signs. The Pan-Am disaster should have illuminated signs as to terrorists' ability to overcome security measures (the Semtex bomb used in the Pan Am disaster could not be detected by traditional x-ray machinery, but only by advanced EDS[Explosive Detection System] such as InVision's CTX series and L-3 Examiner, which are now placed at airports). However, this was not the issue regarding the September 11th attack, but rather the simplicity of hijacking the jets. From this point of view, the September 11th attack was not a surprise, but rather an 'escalation by nature', or, rephrasing Clausewitz, proverb: *'War is merely the continuation of policy by other means'*

From this perspective, Habash's 'Quadrojacking' of 1970 was supposed to be a wake-up call, which was ignored by decision makers.

The September 11th attack was another mile stone representing a new modus, using the aircraft as a strategic agent. By using the term 'strategic agent' the author refers to a possible use of a stolen/leased/hired aircraft for the purpose of spreading WMD. Again, signs were apparent when it was discovered that the September 11th terrorists were studying the possible use of crop dusters to spread biological or chemical agents.

This evidence, alongside the 'disappearing jet' from Angola, a Boeing 727 which disappeared from Luanda airport in Angola on 25 May 2003, raises 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 missile ^{iv}. The stolen or disappearing jet may emphasize again the change of modus: from a commercial fully-loaded passenger jet which is used for the purpose of negotiation, to a cargo or small private airplane which will be used as a strategic agent. Again, the potential use of WMD is not a theoretically-based assumption, but already an existing reality, as demonstrated by Shoko Asahara in 1995, attacking Tokyo's underground with Sarin nerve gas. It is clear that these sort of attacks are a possibility. The question is what decision makers are going to do about it.

The main point that should be emphasized, is the need to focus on near-future threats, rather than past-traditional tactics. One may see a pattern regarding terrorists activities: escalating the threat, i.e. not just sabotaging the aircraft, as occurred in the Pan –Am disaster, but rather causing massive casualties by using the aircraft not as a target, but rather as a strategic agent.

¹ Gearty, C. (1991) *Terror*, London: Faber and Faber p. 10

² Interview: Palestinian Leila Khaled by: Sana Abdallah, The Washington Times, July 21, 2003 Available in: <http://washingtontimes.com/upi-breaking/20030721-082110-7107r.htm> [August 22, 2003]

³ Clausewitz, C.V (1976) *On War*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 87

⁵ G.L. Dillingham, 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], Yediote Ahronot", July 21, 2003, p. 6