

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT:



STILL AN AVIATION SECURITY CONCERN ON ISRAEL'S 70TH BIRTHDAY?

14 May 2018 will be a day of celebration for some, but one of grief for others. On this date 70 years ago, the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel was proclaimed. So, whilst realising Zionist aspirations and offering a refuge for European, and indeed global, Jewry in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, it also triggered a violent conflict, which has claimed many lives and to this day remains unresolved. The struggle for a Palestinian homeland has also been a key part of aviation security history, but have the atrocities perpetrated by the likes of al Qaeda, Daesh and other radical Islamists now made it less likely that groups with purportedly political agendas will target aviation in the future? **Iris Chatzidaki-Pefani** takes a timely look at the threat posed to aviation by those fighting for the Palestinian cause.

Whilst the Middle East has long been an arena for war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began in earnest after World War I when the United Kingdom assumed control of Palestine. In 1917, the British Government issued the Balfour Declaration, announcing its intention to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. Immediately afterwards, Arab nationalism awakened and demonstrations against a Jewish national home turned into riots. The violence rapidly spread throughout the country and continued during World War II. As the Arabs rejected all proposals, including power sharing with the Jews and delimitation of national borders, the British Government decided to turn the issue over to the United Nations. In 1947,

the Partition Plan was approved by the United Nations General Assembly. It was agreed that Palestine would comprise 43.33% of Mandatory Palestine, which included Western Galilee, the hills of Judea and Samaria (excluding Jerusalem), and the Coastal Plain from Isdud (Ashdod) to the Sinai frontier. Israel would receive 56.67% of Mandatory Palestine, which covered Eastern Galilee, the Jezreel Valley, most of the Coastal Plain, and the Negev. The Jerusalem enclave was to be under UN trusteeship.

Following the departure of the British Army, the Arab world resolved to destroy the new Jewish state. On the day following the establishment of Israel, the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq joined together and invaded. However, the lack of coordination and internal strife

between the Arab governments, along with the higher morale and better organisation of the fledgling Israeli army, led to the Arabs' defeat. The war ended with Israel controlling about 40% more land than had even been proposed by the UN Partition Plan. Egypt and Jordan respectively administered the remaining portions of Gaza and the West Bank of the Jordan River, and in 1950 Jordan brought the West Bank under its jurisdiction. These hostilities created a major humanitarian crisis, with almost 750,000 Palestinians being uprooted from their land. They were forced to live in refugee camps in the Arab-occupied parts of Israel and in neighbouring Arab countries. In the following years, Egypt, Jordan and Syria supported attacks from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the Golan Heights on Israel, and in 1967 an armed

struggle often referred to as 'the Six-Day War' broke out between Israel and these three countries. Again, Israel prevailed, claiming the West Bank, Gaza Strip, the Sinai desert and the Golan Heights, where refugee camps had been established by Palestinians in 1948. Consequently, civilians that had fled from their homeland due to the partition of Palestine, were obligated to live under Israeli authority.

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The resentment of the Arab world caused by the forced division of Palestine, the migration of the country's population, the adverse living conditions in the refugee camps, the several failed attempts to destroy Israel through direct armed conflict and the loss of additional territory resulted in the founding of a number of terrorist groups. Many Palestinians were convinced that the liberation of their homeland could only be achieved through armed uprisings. Although such terrorist attacks did not manage to destroy Israel, they managed to accomplish short-term goals, something that the wars were unable to do - including attracting global attention to the Palestinian cause, harassing the Israeli Government via direct attacks either against its army or at its overseas embassies, attacking Jewish communities outside of Israel and punishing those states who were supportive of Israel. A notable outcome of these events was the granting of a non-state observer status to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) at the United Nations in 1974 and its recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

Palestinian groups perfected the propaganda of the deed through dramatic violent acts, such as the hijacking and subsequent simultaneous destruction of three airliners (TWA, Swissair and BOAC) at Dawson's Field by members of the PFLP in 1970. Civilians were attacked on numerous occasions:

during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Palestinian terrorists from the group Black September infiltrated the Olympic Village in an action that culminated in the deaths of eleven Israeli athletes. Terrorist groups also launched a series of attacks against countries that were responsible for the partition of Palestine. In 1983, for instance, suicide terrorists drove two trucks carrying explosives into the US marine and French military barracks in Beirut, killing 241 marines and 56 French military personnel. Hezbollah claimed responsibility for the attack. An example of a direct attack on the Israeli Government was the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Argentina, for which the Islamic Jihad Organisation - a front for Hezbollah - claimed responsibility.

Apart from Hezbollah, several other terrorist organisations were founded with Israel as a common enemy. The aforementioned PLO was founded with the purpose of liberating Palestine through armed struggle, and to represent the Palestinian people. It was an umbrella organisation comprising most of the Palestinian terrorist organisations but dominated by Fatah. Fatah was a Palestinian nationalist political party and its main goal, as stated in Article 12 of the official Fatah constitution was the

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'complete liberation of Palestine and eradication of Zionist economic, political, military and cultural existence'.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) aimed to create an image of the Palestinian struggle as part of the worldwide Marxist-Leninist revolution, establish a Marxist-Leninist government in Palestine and opposed all efforts to negotiate a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The goals of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) also included the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Additionally, it rejected any move towards moderation in the Palestinian movement.

The Abu Nidal Organisation was a breakaway faction of Fatah that became a mercenary group for various Arab governments. It sought to destroy Israel, undermine efforts to negotiate Israeli-Palestinian peace and intimidate those nations holding members of the group as prisoners into releasing them. Meanwhile, the political objectives of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) advocated an international stance that placed the Palestinian struggle within a general world context of liberation in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The DFLP also supported the Non-Aligned Movement and fought against imperialism and racism. The Palestinian Front's political objectives included the dismantling of the state of Israel and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state; it also opposed Yasser Arafat's leadership of the PLO.

Hezbollah, despite not being a Palestinian group itself, was initially established as a response to Israel's



Commemorative tickets issued by the PFLP in the aftermath of the Dawson's Field hijackings of 1970



Daniel Brühl & Rosamund Pike in *7 Days in Entebbe*, the latest (2018) film to recreate the hijacking of an Air France flight to Uganda in 1977 (Credit: Liam Daniel)

control of the southern part of Lebanon (from 1982 until 2000), and sought to establish a revolutionary Shi'a Islamic state in Lebanon, eliminate non-Islamic influences and force Western interests out of the region. Meanwhile, Hamas aimed to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation and restore the rights of the Palestinian people under the sacred Islamic teachings of the Qur'an. Hamas and Hezbollah remain key players in the region; whilst most of the world views them as terrorist organisations, they have gained some legitimacy in the region through their participation in elections, which have shown the broad scope of their supporters and their being elected into office – Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

As can be observed, these terrorist organisations share some similarities in their ideologies, as well as in their operational tactics. They have executed both domestic and international terrorist attacks. Their targets have included embassies, synagogues, transportation hubs, marketplaces and military checkpoints. However, one of their primary targets has been civil aviation. Initially, the preventative security measures in situ were limited, thereby facilitating attacks. Attacks on airports and aircraft gave the opportunity to target large numbers of people, both nationals and foreigners, who were gathered in enclosed spaces from which they could not easily escape. Aviation terrorism was also favoured as it created fear and had a negative impact in the economic development of the country, for it affected tourism and destroyed infrastructure.

The first terrorist attack against civil aviation executed for the Palestinian cause was conducted on 23 July 1968 and involved members of the PFLP hijacking El Al flight 426 from Rome to Tel Aviv. After this incident, many others followed. In 1969, for instance, the PFLP-GC hijacked TWA flight 840, again from Rome to Tel

Aviv, in an attempt to assassinate the Israeli ambassador Yitzhak Rabin who was scheduled to be on board the aircraft but did not fly that day (Rabin later became Israel's Prime Minister and was eventually assassinated, albeit by an Israeli). In 1972, PFLP members commandeered Lufthansa flight 649 from Tokyo to Frankfurt, where they received USD \$5 million ransom in exchange for the passengers and crew. Another example was the 1985 hijacking of EgyptAir flight 648 from Athens to Cairo by members of the Abu Nidal Organisation.

The last recorded hijacking executed by Palestinian terrorist organisations was in 1986, when the Abu Nidal Organisation took control of Pan Am flight 73 from Bombay to Frankfurt. The group was planning to use the hijacked aircraft to release Palestinian prisoners in both Cyprus and Israel.

“...the Palestinian National Charter remains unchanged, thereby still denying Israel's right to exist...”

Hijackings at the time were frequently employed to pressure governments into meeting the political demands of terrorist groups. In the majority of cases, this involved the release of members or supporters of the groups from prison and was used to bring their political cause to the world's attention. However, alongside hijackings other methods of attack were employed. In 1972, for instance, there was an armed assault at Lod airport, killing 26 and injuring 80. Other examples include the missile attack against an El Al aircraft at Rome airport in 1974, the assassination attempt on Khaddam, the foreign minister of Syria at Abu Dhabi International Airport in 1977, and the bombing of Gulf Air flight 771 in 1983. Simultaneous attacks on passengers in the check-in zones at Rome and Vienna airports in December 1985 were carried out by the Abu Nidal Organisation. And, in 1986, in an action deemed to be state-sponsored (by Syria), an El Al aircraft operating from London to Tel Aviv was targeted by tricking an unsuspecting pregnant Irish woman into carrying an IED onto the flight; she was identified by El Al security and the bomber, Nezar Hindawi, was arrested.

Many of the Palestinian terrorist groups had, in the 70s and 80s, also collaborated with foreign terrorist organisations to execute their attacks. The benefits of these collaborations rested in the

Palestinians' ability to use individuals of different nationalities to launch attacks on their behalf without raising suspicion; in exchange, the Palestinian groups offered training and weaponry. Collaborative attacks were conducted alongside the likes of the Japanese Red Army, such as the Lod Airport massacre in 1972, and the Revolutionäre Zellen (Revolutionary Cells), with whom they hijacked Air France flight 139 to Entebbe in 1976. However, while Palestinian terrorist organisations and their causes remained active, as Germany reunified and as the Soviet Union was dismantled, most of their leftist foreign partners disintegrated, leading to a loss of tactical and operational capabilities.

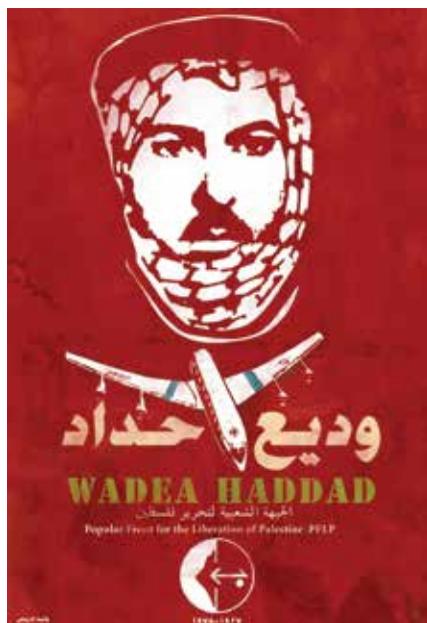
Due in part to this, by the late 1980s, hijackings were gradually abandoned by terrorist organisations. They realised that they could threaten, intimidate and damage their enemy without resorting to a difficult and risky tactic that could end in failure and operate without the need for co-conspirators. Aircraft bombing, as a tactic, actually began in the '70s when the PFLP-GC bombed Swissair flight 330 using an IED initiated by a barometric pressure trigger. Between 1987 and 1988 the focal point of the Abu Nidal Organisation was the execution of all traitors – those suspected of being double agents – within the movement, which limited its international attacks. Additionally, between 1987 and 1993, and 2000 and 2005, the First and Second Intifadas occurred – Palestinian uprisings against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Most of the Palestinian terrorist organisations were involved in the uprisings, which also contributed to the reduction in the number of international attacks. Those bombings that did occur, such as Pan Am in 1988 and UTA in 1989, were not carried out by Palestinian groups, and Israel was not the target.

Other important events that heralded the decline in mainstream Palestinian attacks against civil aviation included the letter exchange between PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, in which Arafat recognised the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security and stated that the PLO committed itself to a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Palestine and Israel. However, the remaining PLO members opposed Arafat's views and the wording of the Palestinian National Charter remains unchanged, thereby still denying Israel's right to exist.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 – neither perpetrated by Palestinian groups

nor for the Palestinian cause - also played a significant role. After 9/11, the attention of the international community was fixed upon terrorist organisations such as al Qaeda and, later on, ISIS. These terrorists were no longer fighting for a nationalist cause but as radical Islamists, even if their rhetoric embraced the Palestinian cause as means to garner support. Even when terrorist attacks were based on a political cause, they were not driven by the fight for Palestinian statehood but rather for other causes such as a greater Syria and the spread of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. They utilise extreme forms of violence, which are denounced by Palestinian terrorist groups, 9/11 being a significant example of this with aircraft being controlled by suicidal pilots. These hijackings were not perpetrated as leverage for negotiations or as a platform for putting forward demands; the airliners were used as weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, whilst the Palestinian organisations' short-term objectives are ostensibly feasible and clear, such as the release of prisoners, the radical Islamist organisations have broader and not so easily achievable medium-term objectives, such as the increase of influence and economic power of the group as well as the control of territory.

Radical Islamist terrorist groups like al Qaeda and ISIS, have been widely and openly criticised by those fighting against Israel. In an interview with Yahoo News, the political leader of Hamas rejected any comparison to ISIS and condemned the latter's actions regarding the beheadings of civilians and journalists. Hezbollah not only opposed ISIS but also deployed



PFLP poster with an aviation theme



The Abu Nidal Organisation effected coordinated attacks on Rome and Vienna airports in 1985

thousands of fighters to fight against it and called upon the countries of the Middle East to join the battle against it in Syria and Iraq. The PFLP wished to distance itself from ISIS, as it contended that ISIS's entry in Syria had been facilitated and supported by imperialist powers, which conflicted with PFLP's ideology. More specifically, the PFLP supported the removal of any imperialistic influence in Palestine and the Middle East and has openly promoted a conspiracy theory about ISIS.

CONCLUSION

During the 70 years since the establishment of the State of Israel, the country has experienced numerous wars and terrorist attacks. Terrorist organisations fighting against Israel have conducted operations against civil aviation in Israel, as well as overseas, due to the industry's symbolism and importance.

Civil aviation remains at risk – but the threat is no longer directly posed as a result of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The terrorist groups fighting for Palestinian independence have realised that violence, especially since 9/11, has been counter-productive and that they can achieve equal or greater benefits by attacking targets that present fewer obstacles. The 9/11 attacks also had an impact on the Palestinian terrorist organisations' selection of tactics and targets as they have sought to differentiate themselves from radical Islamist groups and therefore denounce and distance themselves from extreme forms of violence.

Israel itself has long been regarded as offering the gold standard in aviation

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security controls and, as a result, there has been no successful attack against an Israeli carrier since 1968. Indeed, this was one reason why groups elected to target more vulnerable elements of the civil aviation community. Globally, the advances in aviation security since 9/11 cannot be understated. Airports have implemented multiple layers of security and passengers must undergo more thorough baggage, body and documentation checks. However, it is important to note, that while some countries may have developed and implemented tight security measures in their airports, others have fallen behind, making them more vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Also, while Palestinian terrorist organisations may refrain from attacking civil aviation, there are still those individual supporters of the Palestinian cause, who may, as lone actors, decide to exploit our vulnerabilities. We cannot be complacent. ■



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