

Why does terrorism keep catching Israel by surprise?

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 06.10.2026

We are, again, surprised. The recent incident aboard a Flydubai aircraft, and the suspicion that the co-pilot attempted to seize control, raises a question we should have asked long ago: Why do we continue to be surprised when terrorism changes form?

Whenever a new form of attack emerges, we tend to say that we had not thought of it. This reflects a failure of imagination: the inability to prepare for threats outside established patterns of thought. Terrorism is adaptive. When barriers are strengthened, attackers seek other routes; when surveillance improves, new vulnerabilities are exploited; when ground infiltration becomes difficult, tunnels emerge.

The lesson is not that we must predict the precise form of the next attack. We cannot. We must recognize that another form will emerge and prepare our institutions to think beyond conventional patterns.

We must interpret what our enemies say through their psychological and ideological frameworks rather than our own. The critical question is not, "Why would they do such a thing?" but, "What might they dare to do?"

This lesson acquired its most traumatic significance on October 7, 2023. Israel had built around Gaza an extensive defensive system based on barriers, surveillance, intelligence, technology, early warning, and military power. Yet we focused heavily on capabilities while paying insufficient attention to the enemy's ideological and religious worldview. We assumed that Hamas would necessarily be deterred by the price it knew it might have to pay. But an enemy does not have to assign the same weight to risk and cost that we do. The deeper failure was conceptual: we assumed that the enemy's calculations would resemble our own.

This brings us to incitement. A state may arrest terrorists, destroy infrastructure, improve intelligence, and build sophisticated defenses, yet still confront a generation raised in an environment where hatred and the glorification of violence are presented as legitimate. If we focus only on the individual who has

already decided to attack, we address the problem too late. We must also examine the messages and social environment that help make violence conceivable.

Israel has often responded to hostile incitement with protests, reports, condemnations, or diplomatic complaints, but without treating it as a sustained strategic challenge. Not every expression of incitement produces a terrorist, and there is no simple causal equation between a message and an attack. Yet systematic glorification of violence can create an environment in which violence becomes permissible or even heroic. By our assessment, Israel has failed to address this phenomenon systematically, particularly within the Palestinian Authority, and has too often treated serious incitement in Egypt and Jordan as unavoidable.

The issue has therefore not received the political attention and resources required for a comprehensive campaign. Responsibility also extends beyond government to educators, media, and the public. What begins as an alarming message can gradually become background noise, helping sustain the environment in which terrorism regenerates. Israel should demand that systems it finances or enables through international mechanisms meet basic educational and civic standards and do not promote its destruction. It should also explain internationally that support for terrorism is not merely an Israeli problem, and that Hamas and Hezbollah, supported by Iran, form part of a broader challenge.

The Flydubai incident should therefore prompt self-examination. No security system can prevent every act of terrorism, but security depends on asking what we have failed to imagine. The objective of the IDF should be the removal of the threat, rather than merely reducing, managing, or containing it, while the state addresses the ideological conditions that allow threats to regenerate.

The incident may have been a miracle. Approximately 180 people were aboard the aircraft, and the consequences could have been catastrophic. Human courage, professional skill, and luck deserve recognition. But luck cannot become a security doctrine. The real test is whether we can ask, before the next crisis: What are we still not seeing? Which threat appears impossible simply because we cannot believe that anyone would dare to carry it out?

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