

Why Does Terrorism Surprise Us? Incitement as a Case in Point

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Key Points

- Blocking one avenue of attack drives terrorist organizations to seek another vulnerability.
- Countering terrorism requires thinking beyond familiar scenarios and continually questioning underlying assumptions.
- We must understand the enemy's beliefs, intentions, and willingness to make sacrifices.
- Assuming that it will be deterred by costs we consider unbearable may lead to another surprise.
- Education that promotes hatred and glorifies violence justifies and legitimizes attacks on Israelis and Jews. Focusing solely on the attacker means intervening too late.
- Combating incitement requires sustained political attention, resources, intelligence monitoring, and systematic action against those who spread it.
- Israel should demand that public systems receiving Israeli or international funding refrain from incitement, and work to make combating the ideological foundations of terrorism an international priority.

Introduction

We are surprised. Once again, we are surprised. The incident that occurred on September 30th aboard a Flydubai aircraft – and the suspicion that the co-pilot attempted to seize control of the aircraft and cause a catastrophe – raises a question we should have asked long ago: Why do we continue to be surprised when terrorism changes form? The possibility that someone operating within a civilian system could use that position to inflict mass harm is hardly new.

On September 11, 2001, terrorists with flight training transformed commercial aircraft into weapons. Yet whenever a new form of attack emerges, we tend to say that we had not thought of it. This points to a deeper problem: what might be

called a failure of imagination. We know that terrorism evolves, but we struggle to prepare for threats that fall outside established patterns of thought. The problem is therefore not simply whether we can respond to known threats. It is whether we can imagine what an adversary might attempt before it does so.

The history of terrorism is a history of adaptation. When fences and physical barriers were strengthened, attackers sought other ways through. When surveillance systems and sensors improved, new vulnerabilities were exploited. When measures were taken to counter suicide bombings, other methods emerged; when ground infiltration became more difficult, tunnels appeared, followed by drones and other technologies. Terrorism does not stand still while the defender improves. It studies the defender, identifies habits and assumptions, and searches for the point at which the defender feels most secure.

This creates an ongoing competition in learning and adaptation between attacker and defender. Because the attacker generally holds the initiative, the defender is inherently reactive. The danger becomes greater when we underestimate or dismiss the adversary's ability to learn, adapt, and translate that learning into new forms of violence. Israel experienced this repeatedly during the First Intifada and later during the Second Intifada, when suicide bombings required the development of new methods of prevention. Each time, a threat that appeared new eventually became manageable. But closing one avenue did not eliminate the underlying problem; it merely encouraged the search for another.

The lesson is not that we must predict the precise form of the next attack. We cannot. The lesson is that a new form of attack will emerge, and that our institutions must be prepared to think beyond established patterns. Above all, we must learn to listen to what our enemies say – both explicitly and between the lines – and interpret those messages within their psychological and ideological frameworks rather than through our own. The central question should not be, “Why would they do such a thing?” but rather, “What might they dare to do?”

This lesson acquired its most traumatic significance on October 7, 2023. Israel had constructed an extensive defensive system around the Gaza Strip based on a fence, physical obstacles, surveillance, intelligence, technology, early warning, and overwhelming military capabilities. Yet we focused heavily on the enemy's capabilities while paying insufficient attention to the intentions shaped by its ideological and religious worldview. Hamas did not have to confront the defensive

system in the way we expected. It could seek to circumvent it, disable it, and exploit the assumptions on which our sense of security rested.

The deeper failure was therefore conceptual. 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 weigh risk, cost, and survival in the same way we do. It may be prepared to sacrifice far more than we imagine. One of the most dangerous mistakes a security establishment can make is to assume that the enemy's calculations must resemble its own.

The recent aviation incident reminds us that civilian systems can become arenas of terrorism and that vulnerabilities can originate within the system itself. The question is not whether every pilot or every employee should be regarded as a suspect. It is whether a security system designed to protect itself from external threats is also capable of recognizing vulnerabilities created by people, technologies, or habits within the system.

Combating Incitement as a Case in Point

This brings us to a broader issue that extends far beyond aircraft. The operational struggle against terrorism is essential, but it cannot by itself prevent terrorism from re-emerging. A state may arrest terrorists, destroy infrastructure, improve intelligence, and build sophisticated defensive systems, yet still confront a new generation raised in an environment where hatred, incitement, and the glorification of violence are presented as legitimate. If we focus only on the individual who has already decided to carry out an attack, we are addressing the problem only at the final stage. We must also examine the messages, values, and social environment that helped make violence conceivable.

This is where incitement becomes a national-security issue. Over the years, Israeli society has become accustomed to treating terrorism as a permanent feature of the regional landscape - something with which we must somehow learn to live. The peace agreements with the Palestinian Authority were intended to create a different reality, yet alongside continuing security threats, hostile incitement has persisted in educational systems, media, social media, and political discourse. Israel has often responded with protests, reports, condemnations, threats, or diplomatic complaints, only to move on to the next issue. That approach has failed to treat incitement as part of the environment in which terrorism develops.

Not every expression of incitement produces a terrorist, and there is no simple causal equation between a particular message and a particular attack. But a society that systematically glorifies violence or presents hatred as heroism creates an environment in which acts that later appear “unthinkable” can become conceivable. Israel has failed, in our assessment, to address this phenomenon systematically within the Palestinian Authority. It has also tended to regard serious incitement in Egypt and Jordan as an unavoidable reality, rather than as an issue requiring sustained diplomatic and political pressure.

Various Israeli governments and ministries have undertaken initiatives to combat incitement, including efforts associated with Ministers Moshe Ya’alon, Yuval Steinitz, Gilad Erdan, and, more recently, Amichai Chikli. The Foreign Ministry has also acted. Yet the fundamental problem has remained: incitement has never been adequately recognized as a national-security challenge. Consequently, it has not received the resources, political attention, intelligence support, and sustained leadership required for a systematic campaign. This reflects a broader conceptual failure: insufficient attention to the psychological and ideological infrastructure of Palestinian society, and particularly to the worldview of Hamas and its leadership.

Responsibility, however, does not rest with government alone. Journalists, researchers, educators, parents, social-media platforms, and the public all play a role in determining what becomes normalized. Another call for Israel’s destruction, another video inciting hatred or violence, another educational text that presents violence as legitimate, another message denying Israel’s legitimacy – we see them, become angry, and then return to our routines. Over time, what once demanded attention becomes background noise. Yet the fact that not every person exposed to such messages becomes violent does not make the messages irrelevant. Incitement can help create the ideological, social, and moral environment in which violence becomes permissible, justified, or even heroic.

This is why the struggle against incitement cannot be separated from the broader struggle against terrorism. If Israel funds public systems or enables or facilitates their funding through international mechanisms, it has a legitimate interest in demanding that those systems meet basic educational and civic standards and do not promote its destruction. This is not a matter of revenge. It is a question of public responsibility: what do we finance, what messages do we permit, and what boundaries are we prepared to establish? If the struggle against terrorism is a national objective, it cannot be confined to the battlefield.

Nor should the struggle remain exclusively national. Israel must conduct a sustained international campaign explaining that direct or indirect support for terrorism is not merely an Israeli problem. Hamas and Hezbollah are influenced and supported by Iran and form part of a broader struggle against Israel and the values it represents. Israel has not always communicated this argument effectively, and too often international leaders and elites view Israel as part of the problem rather than as an important contributor to the effort to confront violent Islamist radicalism.

Lessons from the Incident

The Flydubai incident therefore calls for self-examination – not because Israel is responsible for every terrorist attack, and not because any security system can prevent every act of violence. No system can. The question is whether, after every surprise, we ask only how the attacker succeeded or whether we also ask what we failed to imagine. We must examine not only the fence, the camera, the intelligence system, or the weapon, but also the assumptions that led us to believe those measures were sufficient. Security depends not only on responding quickly to known threats but also on recognizing that the next threat may emerge from an entirely different direction.

This also requires a clear definition of the military objective. The IDF's objective should be to eliminate the threat, rather than merely reduce its scale, manage it, control it, or contain it. At the same time, the state must address the ideological conditions that allow the threat to re-emerge. Technology will continue to become cheaper and more accessible. If one route is closed, another will be sought; if drones are defeated, another method will emerge. The enduring challenge is therefore not to achieve a mythical "final victory" over every possible tactic, but to change the conditions that repeatedly generate new tactics and new perpetrators.

The outcome of the Flydubai incident may well have been miraculous. Approximately 180 people were aboard the aircraft, and the consequences of a successful takeover could have been catastrophic. The fact that disaster was averted gives us reason to acknowledge human courage, professional skill, resourcefulness, and luck. But luck cannot become a security doctrine. A state cannot build its security on the assumption that someone will always notice the danger in time, that every system will function at the critical moment, or that a

miracle will occur when it is needed.

The real test of a security system is therefore not simply how quickly it responds when something happens. It is whether, before something happens, it can ask: What are we still not seeing? What are we still unable to imagine? Which threat appears impossible to us simply because we cannot believe that anyone would dare to carry it out? These are not rhetorical questions. They are the foundation of strategic thinking in an environment in which the attacker learns continuously and the defender cannot afford to remain trapped in yesterday's assumptions.

We must therefore hold more than the individual who attempts an attack to account. We must also examine our own failures - the threats we saw but did not take seriously, the possibilities we dismissed because they seemed irrational, and the incitement that gradually became background noise. Not everyone exposed to such messages will become violent, and not every terrorist attack can be traced to them. But a policy that waits until an individual has already chosen a weapon is addressing the threat far too late.

The simplest question is also the most difficult: How many more times must we be surprised before we understand that surprise itself has become part of the problem?

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