

Innovation in Terrorist Organizations

The Case of PFLP and its Offshoots

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Between the end of the 1960's and the mid 1980's, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and its various offshoots pioneered an innovative terrorist strategy, along with several related tactics. The PFLP's innovation lay, first, in the identification of the global community as the primary target audience for Palestinian activism; second, in the selection of the aviation system as the prime target for their attacks; and third, in the incorporation of foreign nationals into their operations. Offshoots of the PFLP extended this strategy, pioneering significant micro-tactical innovations. These innovations enabled the PFLP and its offshoots to execute some of the most dramatic operations seen in the 20th century, setting a trend that would only be broken decades later by the September 11th, 2001, attacks. Further, these attacks provided a template not only for other Palestinian groups, but for terrorist groups all over the world. This makes the PFLP's record a good starting point for exploring the factors that produce and drive innovation within terrorist organizations. In turn, this exploration builds a solid platform for discussing the extent that security organizations, knowing these factors, can predict and undercut the emergence of innovative capacities in both contemporary and future terrorist networks.

The Rise of the PFLP's International Terrorism Strategy

After Israel's decisive victory in the Six Day War, Palestinian resistance groups realized their hopes of liberation would not be fulfilled by the armies of Arab states and that they would have to pursue their radical agenda on their own. Lacking a conventional military, many in the resistance movement argued that they should engage in guerrilla/terrorist warfare against Israel, operating out of the newly occupied territories and relying on the strategic depth of neighboring Arab countries. However, the terrain of the West Bank was unsuitable for this style of warfare, and the Arab states were unwilling to support their Palestinian brethren. These factors, combined with the fact that Israel reacted effectively to those attacks that were carried out, led many militant Palestinian leaders back to the proverbial drawing board. This re-evaluation sparked a revolutionary approach to terrorism in the minds of PFLP leaders.

Steered by George Habash and Waddia Haddad – Christian Palestinians trained as physicians at the American University in Beirut – the PFLP was born out of a merger between several earlier organizations, most notably, the Arab Nationalist Movement, Youth for Revenge, and the Palestine Liberation Front. From its inception, the PFLP was dedicated to the expulsion of Jews from Israel and, more broadly, to the Pan-Arabist belief that the Arabs must unite to overthrow Western imperialism and the reactionary puppet regimes it had installed in the Arab world.

In a 1967 meeting of the organization's leadership, Waddia Haddad, then the leader of the group's military wing, leveled a direct challenge to the strategy of guerrilla operations: “Trying to get men and weapons across the Jordan into Israel is a waste of time and effort. Armed struggle of that type will never achieve the liberation of Palestine... We have to hit the Israeli army in a qualitative way, not quantitative way. This is a particular animal, the IDF [Israel Defense Forces]; we cannot fight it

plane for plane, tank for tank, soldier for soldier. We have to hit the Israelis at the weak joints”.¹⁰ His proposed solution involved a major strategic shift:

What do I mean by the weak joints? I mean spectacular, one-off operations. These spectacular operations will focus the world’s attention on the problem of Palestine. The world will ask, ‘What the hell is the problem in Palestine? Who are these Palestinians? Why are they doing these things?’ At the same time, such operations will be highly painful for the Israelis. High-profile, sensational operations, carried out by thoroughly trained people in secure underground structures – this is how we shall hit at the painful joints. In the end, the world will get fed up with its problem; it will decide it has to do something about Palestine. It will have to give us justice.¹¹

Elaborating, Haddad explained that the main idea was to hijack an El Al airliner and to hold its passengers and crew hostage. Haddad claimed that if such an operation failed to get the attention of international media, then probably nothing could succeed in achieving this goal. “It shouldn’t be necessary to use actual violence. We don’t even have to hit Israeli targets all the time. But we must be a constant irritation, a bug under the skin of the developed world. We must make them lose patience with Israel and Palestine that hard way.”¹² While these actions would not precipitate Israel’s downfall, they would, Haddad argued, draw sufficient international attention to the Palestinian problem and force a resolution. In the following months, Haddad created a separate special operations unit dedicated to executing such international operations.

Palestinian operatives developed this innovative strategy through the experience of executing spectacular attacks. The first hijackings were designed to impact Western public opinion and to inflate the power image of Palestinian groups, demonstrating their ability to attack Western targets if their demands and national agenda were not met. At the same time, the new strategy aimed to coerce the release of prisoners in Israeli jails and, later, the release of failed hijackers who were caught during their missions. These tactics were rapidly adopted by other Palestinian groups as well as other international terrorist groups.

In July 1968, five members of the new unit were deployed, hijacking an El Al flight from Rome to Tel-Aviv. The kidnapers forced the plane to divert to Algeria, carrying 36 passengers and ten crewmembers. After landing, the kidnapers released the non-Israeli passengers. The remaining five passengers and seven crewmembers were held hostage in an Algerian police station near the airport. As Haddad hoped, the airline’s hijacking became an international incident; Israel, faced with an unfamiliar challenge, turned to the US for help. All US attempts to find a swift resolution failed, and the crisis dragged out until September, ultimately coming to resolution through Italian mediation. In August 1969, the PFLP followed up on this initial foray, deploying two operatives to take control of TWA flight 840 from Los Angeles to Tel Aviv. Claiming that they launched the attack in retaliation against US military aid to Israel, the hijackers landed the aircraft in Syria, deplaned the hostages, and blew up the cockpit.¹³ The US demanded that Syria arrange the release of all hostages, but the Assad regime declined, allowing only a dozen crewmembers and 93 non-Israeli passengers to leave. Two male Israeli hostages were released at the end of October 1969, only after Israel agreed to release some Egyptian soldiers.

This strategic innovation soon gave rise to tactical innovations as well, such as ground attacks on European airports. For example, in December 1968 a parked El Al airplane was attacked at Athens

¹⁰ Bassam Abu-Sharif and Uzi Mahnaimi, *Tried by Fire*, (London: Little Brown & Co., 1995) p. 59.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 59-60.

¹² *Ibid* pp. 59-60.

¹³ Timothy Naphtali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism*, (New York: Basic Books, 2005) pp. 35-36.

International Airport. One mechanic was killed and two others were injured.¹⁴ In February 1969, four PFLP operatives opened fire and threw grenades at an El Al airline while it was departing Zurich Airport, killing an Israeli co-pilot, three other crew members, and injuring three passengers. An Israeli air marshal managed to kill one of the terrorists, while the three other operatives were eventually captured.¹⁵

Habash's organization declared it would broaden its worldwide activities and focus, not only on Israeli targets, but on any target that belonged to the US-led “imperialistic world.”¹⁶ Throughout the summer and fall of 1969, the PFLP bombed several European and Israeli targets, including three Israeli related-businesses and a Marks and Spencer shop in London.¹⁷ In September, the PFLP extended its scope to targets in the Netherlands, Belgium, and West Germany. These attacks expanded the plan to attract Western attention and built on the group's declared agenda of international revolution. The success of the first operations encouraged them to continue with this second gambit. Haddad personally selected all targets and supervised every operation.

These high-profile operations were not only tactical successes, but strategic victories as well. As Haddad had predicted, they brought international attention to the Palestinian problem. Their success also significantly boosted the PFLP's stature among Palestinian groups. In 1969, after the PFLP accepted Iraqi and Soviet sponsorship, Habash's organization fully capitalized on its increasing popularity, nearly tripling its size and significantly upgrading its capabilities. These improvements were on full display when the organization launched the so-called “airplane operations” – the most spectacular, innovative undertaking it has attempted to date.

The “Airplanes Operation”: The Pinnacle of PFLP’s International Operations

Building on the success of the earlier hijackings, Haddad resolved to hijack not one, but three airplanes en route to New York – selecting an American target because attacking American objectives led to the highest level of media attention. The planes were all to be landed on the same isolated strip in Jordan (an Arab country targeted for reasons beyond the scope of this paper). The operation was launched on September 6th, 1970, when TWA flight 741, en route from Frankfurt, was hijacked with 141 passengers and 10 crewmembers aboard. The next airline to be hijacked was Swissair flight 100 from Zurich, with 143 passengers and 12 crewmembers aboard.

While the first two hijackings went according to plan, the third hijacking, El Al flight 219, Amsterdam to New York, did not. According to Haddad’s plan, an operative from a left-wing Nicaraguan guerrilla group and a Palestinian woman by the name of Leila Khaled would pose as a married couple to deceive El Al security personnel in Amsterdam. Two other operatives were supposed to infiltrate the plane in the traditional fashion. While the “married” couple managed to board the plane, the other two, of Palestinian origin, were not allowed to board, but were also not arrested by the authorities.¹⁸ Shortly after takeoff, the two remaining operatives attempted to hijack the plane. The Israeli pilot, who had been trained in counter-terrorism tactics – a direct result of the

¹⁴ “Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism’s Terrorism Knowledge Base”, <www.tkb.org>, [MIPT TKB]. (Website is no longer available. For clarification please contact the author.)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Abu-Sharif and Mahnaimi 81.

1968 Algeria hijacking – turned the plane sharply and entered it into a steep nose-dive.¹⁹ As a result, the hijackers lost their footing and an undercover Israeli security officer shot and killed the male operative. A group of passengers leaped from their seats, charged Khaled, and started beating her. Khaled pulled the safety pin from the hand-grenade that she was carrying and tossed it.²⁰ Fortunately, the grenade did not explode. Her actions, however, indicate that she was ready to turn the operation from a hijacking into a suicide attack. After the passengers took control of Khaled, the pilot turned the plane back and made an emergency landing in London. Khaled was arrested immediately after landing.²¹

The implementation of Haddad's plan suffered from another complication. The two Palestinians who were turned away by El Al security decided to ignore Haddad's directions and improvise instead. The operatives bought tickets on Pan Am flight 93 to New York and successfully hijacked the plane, its 153 passengers, and 17 crewmembers. This airplane, however, was not suitable for Haddad's plan; Pan Am flight 93 flew a Boeing-747, which was too large for the sandy landing strip in Jordan. The kidnappers were ordered to divert the flight to Beirut and load it with explosives. After that, they would fly to Egypt and blow up the plane at Cairo International Airport after evacuating all the hostages. The PFLP's intention for this improvised plan was to embarrass Egypt for announcing its ceasefire with Israel, which ended "the war of attrition" in the Suez Canal.²²

The Swissair and TWA flights landed as planned at an abandoned British airport in Jordan known as "Dawson's field," later renamed the "Revolution Airport." PFLP operatives waited on the ground and helped in securing the plane and handling the hundreds of hostages. Among those at the field was the commander and mastermind of the operation, Waddia Haddad.²³ After completing the hijacking phase of the operation, the PFLP announced that they were not targeting US civilians themselves, but rather the US administration's policies. On the practical level, the PFLP demanded the release of terrorists held by the countries who had citizens among the hostages. As the United States held no terrorists in its prisons, Haddad announced that the US hostages would be released after all other countries had complied. In exchange for the release of the Swiss hostages the PFLP demanded that the Swiss government release several terrorists from Swiss prisons. A similar demand was made of the West German government. The British government was presented with a demand to promptly release Leila Khaled. Israel was required to release several Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the release of the Israeli and dual-nationality (where one nationality was Israeli) hostages.

The negotiations, conducted by the International Red Cross, started the day after the hijacking and dragged out for some time. The United States spent their political capital convincing the nations involved to present a unified front and to agree to release their terrorist prisoners only on the condition that all hostages, regardless of nationality, would be released as well.²⁴

Two incidents took place during the negotiations. On the third day of the crisis, Haddad received a report from Beirut that a BOAC airliner out of Bombay was en route to Dawson. Haddad originally suspected that it was a rescue mission, but soon discovered that a Palestinian PFLP supporter had

¹⁹ Ibid, 82.

²⁰ According to some of the reports it was the male operative who dropped the grenade.

²¹ Abu-Sharif and Mahnaimi, 81.

²² Ibid. 82.

²³ Ibid. 84.

²⁴ Naphtali 43.

privately hijacked the plane after he heard about the arrest of the famous Leila Khaled.²⁵ However, Haddad was still concerned about the possibility of a rescue attempt, and worried that Jordan, heavily embarrassed by the crisis, would attempt to end it by force. Therefore, with the media in attendance, Haddad evacuated the guarded hostages and then blew up the planes.²⁶ The videos and photographs of this scene became some of the best known graphic symbols of the Palestinian international terrorist movement in particular and of international terrorism in general. This event epitomizes the whole strategic aim of the new PFLP strategy to force the world, at gunpoint, to pay attention to the Palestinian problem. Haddad's actions in Jordan gave him that attention in full.

The crisis ended formally on September 30th, with the western European nations exchanging imprisoned terrorists for their hostages. Even Israel agreed to release some Palestinian prisoners, although officially this release was claimed to be unrelated to the hijacking.²⁷ The tactical victories of the airplane operation, though, were quickly translated into strategic difficulties, sparking harsh reprisals from Jordan and a significant global backlash. The consequences were so severe they convinced Habash that it was necessary to curb the PFLP's international operations. Haddad, though, was unwilling to retreat. Ironically, Haddad's most innovative operation led to his departure from the PFLP, along with his special operations unit. This separation shifted the center of gravity from the PFLP to Haddad's splinter organization. However, the PFLP remained a presence among global extremists, albeit one less oriented towards terrorism.

PFLP-External Operations (PFLP-EO, a.k.a.: The Waddia Haddad Faction)

In addition to devising the international operations strategy, Haddad was the chief planner and senior commander of each operation even though he kept such a low a profile he remains almost an obscure figure even today. He also devised the training program for the PFLP's special operations unit — a training program he continued with his new offshoot and significantly upgraded. The first stage of training included standard military skills. During this initial stage, Haddad's handpicked officers singled out those recruits with the highest degree of intelligence, mental strength, physical stamina, and persistence. These recruits, after completing the entry-level regime, were selected for special operations training.²⁸ This advanced training program, wholly of Haddad's making, was strongly geared towards preparing the operatives to execute missions targeting airlines. It focused heavily on techniques designed to overcome both pre-flight and on-board security measures. In some cases, trainees even learned how to pilot airplanes—in case the pilots were injured or killed during the initial takeover, and the operatives had to land the plane themselves.²⁹ Haddad's personal involvement in the training process created strong bonds between himself and his operatives, with many of them idealizing him as a commander and as a human being. In many ways, they were more Haddad's people than PFLP operatives.

In order to further improve his unit's capabilities, Haddad took the unorthodox step of accepting non-Palestinian volunteers, who were often motivated by a combination of sympathy for the Palestinian cause and a desire to acquire the same skills for their own radical agendas. This decision not only lent the organization an international flavor that fit well with their nominal Marxism, but,

²⁵ Abu-Sharif and Mahnaimi 84-85.

²⁶ Ibid. 87.

²⁷ *MIPT-TKB*

²⁸ Ibid. 64.

²⁹ Ibid. 64-65.

more importantly, it offered a way to circumvent "racial" profiling. This tactic was tested in the 1970 hijacking of the El Al plane in Amsterdam; while the two Palestinian operatives were stopped by security, the other two operatives – a Nicaraguan and a Palestinian woman who had undergone plastic surgery – successfully boarded the plane. Among the first to qualify under Haddad were the future founders of the Baader-Meinhoff group. Over the years, Haddad cemented further relations with the West German June 2nd Movement (Bewegung 2. Juni), the Italian Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse), the Japanese Red Army, the Basque ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), the Turkish THKO (Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu), the French Action Directe,³⁰ and the Provisional Irish Republican Army.³¹ In addition, Haddad recruited foreign volunteers who were not members of known organizations but who expressed a willingness to fight for the Palestinian cause. The most notable of those operatives was the Venezuelan Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, better known as “Carlos.”³²

Haddad was a great believer in developing innovative technological tools for his special operations. He specifically recruited engineering and chemistry professionals from all over the Arab world.³³ Among the major fields of research in Haddad's organization was the development of tools to overcome the airport security measures. PFLP's engineers tried to develop various explosive devices that could pass through x-ray screening machines – a counter-innovation starting to appear in airports around the world – without raising suspicion.

Another development of Haddad's special unit was a liquid explosive that resembled red wine. For the initial test of this explosive, Haddad decided to use a South-African operative of Arab origin. The man was so enthusiastic to participate in special operations that he declared his willingness to carry out a suicide mission. Haddad agreed. This was probably the first time the PFLP planned to carry out a suicide attack, an unknown phenomenon at that time. The special explosive was poured into an ordinary Chianti bottle that was sealed with red wax. All the operative had to do was to remove the wrapping from the bottle, which should have made it explode. The operation failed after the operative hesitated and was caught by Israeli authorities.³⁴ In another case, a group of Haddad's operatives was caught while carrying explosives hidden inside ceramic artifacts and religious icons.³⁵

Haddad's original ideas saw extensive deployment in the following years. One of the first to be carried out was the attempted assassination of Lord Joseph Sieff, president of Marks and Spencer and a known supporter of Israel. The assassination attempt was carried out in December 1973 and failed.³⁶ The attack is considered the first operation for “Carlos” and may have served as a test of his courage and loyalty.³⁷ In another noteworthy event, Haddad's group took over the Japanese embassy in Kuwait and successfully negotiated the release of embassy staff in exchange for two Palestinians and two members of the Japanese Red Army, who had collaborated on an attack in Singapore. It seems that Haddad went to this effort because the Japanese, able to travel easily across Europe, were turning from "operational contractors" into an integral part of Haddad's special unit.³⁸

³⁰ Ibid. 67.

³¹ Claire Sterling, *The Terror Network*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), pp. 158-159.

³² Abu-Sharif and Mahnaimi 71-72.

³³ Abu-Sharif and Mahnaimi 73-74.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Interview with a former senior Israeli security official, Jerusalem, August 23rd, 2007.

³⁶ *MIPT-TKB*.

³⁷ Yallop, *To the Ends of the Earth: The Hunt for the Jackal*, (London: Corgi Books, 1994), 343.

³⁸ Ibid. 79.

Subsequently, in order to disrupt the possibility of peace talks between Israel and the PLO, Haddad masterminded two attempts to shoot down El Al planes in France, at the behest of his Iraqi patrons. Both attempts failed. In the aftermath of the second, three operatives, under fire from Israeli security, withdrew into the airport terminal and captured several hostages. After negotiations conducted under the auspices of the Egyptian ambassador to France, they released the hostages and were allowed to leave the country. Many countries refused to allow the attackers to land in their territory, hoping to avoid the appearance of supporting the attack or jeopardizing their relations with France. Ultimately, Iraq was "forced" to allow the operatives to land, ironically because of a direct request from France.

Throughout the mid 1970s, Haddad invested heavily in concocting what some have described as "shock value" operations. For instance, Haddad compiled a hit list of hundreds of targets,³⁹ including names that had no connection to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but were sufficiently high profile to draw attention to the Palestinian struggle. In 1974, the organization set off a triple car bombing of the offices of three French newspapers that supported Israel. A fourth car bomb was discovered before it could be detonated.

In 1975, Iraq tasked Haddad with a special operation: storming OPEC headquarters in Vienna during a gathering of ministers from member states. The Iraqis gave Haddad free rein to plan the attack as he saw fit, but instructed him to kill the Saudi and Iranian oil ministers. Haddad devised a plan to take over the headquarters and kidnap the oil ministers, eventually releasing them in exchange for a plane to the Middle East. Each minister would be released only after he publicly denounced the possibility of dialog with Israel. This part of the plan was intended to get widespread media attention and to hide Iraq's involvement.

While Haddad was the man behind the plan, he decided to give the responsibility for executing it to "Carlos." Haddad selected operatives from members of the June 2nd Movement, since the Baader-Meinhof gang declined to participate and the Japanese were unsuitable for such a mission. The operatives included three Palestinians, two Germans and Carlos as their commander.⁴⁰ The mixed international background of perpetrators was not unusual, because Haddad was known to assign operatives from several countries to the same operation.⁴¹ The involvement of the Palestinians was based on the assumption that they would be more determined executors, as well as Haddad's desire that the operation have a direct and clear linkage to the Palestinian issue. Haddad was directly involved in the training of the operatives for the planned OPEC operation. The Iraqis provided weapons and intelligence as they had for other operations in the past.⁴²

The storming of the OPEC building in December 1975 went as planned and without any special difficulties. Carlos identified himself to the 70 hostages using his full name and credited the operation to "The Arm of the Arab Revolution." The PLO was quick to denounce the attack and it was even condemned by the PFLP.⁴³ After intensive negotiation, the kidnappers' demands were met and they were allowed to leave with their hostages to Algeria. Against the direct orders of Haddad, Carlos accepted the Algerian president's offer to release all of the hostages without killing the two ministers as required by the Iraqis. In exchange, the kidnappers would get ransom from the relevant

³⁹ Ibid. pp. 109-110.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 380.

⁴¹ Abu-Sharif and Mahnaimi, 67.

⁴² Yallop 381.

⁴³ Ibid. 409.

countries. According to one publication, Carlos claimed that he decided to take the offer because he thought that the large sum of money would help finance Haddad's future operations.⁴⁴

Taking high-ranking ministers hostage in an operation including foreign nationals virtually guaranteed Haddad extensive media coverage — and a commensurate rise in the group's international profile. Further, they had fired a shot across the bow of oil-wealthy accommodationist Arab regimes, strongly incentivizing them to invest more heavily in resolving the Palestinian issue. The aftermath of the operation also worked in Haddad's favor: by cashiering Carlos for his insubordination, Haddad bolstered his image of uncompromising leadership.

Audacity and Innovation in Aerial Attacks

In 1976, Haddad launched yet another attempt to shoot down an Israeli plane and kill its passengers, targeting an El Al aircraft as it touched down in Nairobi, Kenya. For this attack, he put together a team combining experienced members of his organization and German operatives. The attempt was thwarted when Kenyan authorities, apparently acting on information provided by Israel, arrested the entire cell. The terrorists were transferred covertly to Israel for interrogation.

This failure did not dissuade Haddad from further attempts to attack aviation targets. In fact, the need to secure the release of the Nairobi cell only added additional incentive.⁴⁵ In July 1976, Haddad dispatched a second cell to hijack Air France flight 139 (Tel Aviv to Paris via Athens), carrying primarily Israeli passengers. This operation succeeded. The operatives forced the plane to land in Entebbe, Uganda, and demanded that the hostages be exchanged for imprisoned comrades—including the three arrested for the Kenya attacks. While the hijacking itself went according to the plan, the operation ended in failure when Israeli commandos raided the plane and rescued the passengers and crew. All of the kidnappers were killed during the rescue mission.

In 1977, Haddad was diagnosed with leukemia. Despite his illness, Haddad continued to develop operational plans, including a repeat of an Entebbe-type hijacking intended to secure the release of the Baader-Meinhof members. The special training for this operation was conducted in Iraq and personally supervised by Haddad. In October 1977, operatives hijacked Lufthansa flight 181 (Palma de Mallorca to Frankfurt) and diverted it to Mogadishu in another attempt to release the German prisoners. Again, Haddad failed after GSG-9, the German counter-terrorist unit, successfully rescued the passengers and crew.⁴⁶ Most of the kidnappers died during the German raid. Worth noting is the fact that the leader of the kidnappers was involved, several months earlier, in the killing of several North Yemen officials in London.⁴⁷ It is possible that Haddad planned this operation on behalf of the government of South Yemen, where he resided for most of the 1970's before moving to Baghdad.

The Mogadishu operation was Haddad's third major failure, with a high cost in both funds and skilled operatives. This, combined with Haddad's deteriorating health, effectively spelled the end of

⁴⁴ Ibid. 407.

⁴⁵ Interview with former Israeli security official, 29 August 2007.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the Haddad faction. Haddad died from leukemia in an East Berlin hospital on March 30, 1978 at the age of 48.

May 15 Organization (Abu-Ibrahim Faction)

Two factions emerged from the ruins of the Haddad group. One, the May 15 Organization, was founded in Iraq by Hussein Mohammad al Umari, AKA “Abu-Ibrahim”. Al Umari, a Palestinian refugee raised in Lebanon and Syria, joined the PFLP because of his support for George Habash's ideas. He named his organization after the date that symbolized the birth of the State of Israel and the Palestinian catastrophe.⁴⁸ Al Umari fully embraced Haddad's flair for innovation and daring, along with “the Master's” belief that, in order to achieve the desired effect, it would be necessary to attack not only Israeli objectives but also American ones, and even those belonging to moderate Arab countries.⁴⁹ From an early stage, al Umari decided to focus his operations against airlines. But while Haddad was interested in hijacking planes, al Umari tried to blow them up while they were still airborne. Accordingly, he invested heavily in developing advanced explosives capabilities along with innovative tactics to circumvent the heightened security measures adopted in many of the world's airports.

One of the most famous products of al Umari's research was a suitcase with explosive material woven directly into the fabric.⁵⁰ Lacking any suspicious external marks, it was thought to be unlikely that, even if airport security personnel found the cases suspicious, they'd be able to identify the explosives. Each suitcase contained a relatively small amount of explosives, but it was more than enough to bring down an airliner in flight.⁵¹ Invented while he was still a member of the Haddad faction, this device would become an al Umari trademark.

In 1982, the May 15 Organization fully deployed its next-generation abilities, dispatching Muhammad Rashid, the organization's top operations expert, on one of the most innovative attacks ever seen on the international stage. During June of that year, Rashid left Baghdad and, in accordance with al Umari's guidelines, stayed in Singapore as a regular tourist for a short period of time to avoid raising suspicion. After that, Rashid took his family with him on a Pan Am flight from Hong Kong to Tokyo. Al Umari correctly assumed that a man flying with his family would escape suspicion; authorities did not expect a terrorist to bring his own family with him during an attack. During the flight, Rashid took a concealed explosive device from his carry-on luggage and hid it inside his seat. The device was built with a barometric fuse that would detonate the bomb during the plane's next flight. After their arrival in Tokyo, Rashid and his family stayed a couple days in Japan before returning to Baghdad.⁵² Meanwhile, the Pan Am plane took off on flight 830 to Hawaii with 267 passengers aboard, most of them Japanese. Shortly before landing, the bomb exploded. The passenger sitting in Rashid's seat died instantly. 28 other passengers were injured. The bomb tore a wide hole into the fuselage and released the cabin's air pressure. Fortunately, the pilot was able to

⁴⁸ Yallop 40.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 42.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 74.

⁵¹ Steven Emerson and Christina Del Sesto, *Terrorist: the inside story of the highest-ranking Iraqi terrorist ever to defect to the West*, (New York: Villard Books, 1991), pp. 44-45, 90-93.

⁵² Ibid. 53-54.

regain control and make an emergency landing, saving the passengers.⁵³ Two more attacks were launched in the following weeks, with bombs planted on a Pan Am flight from Miami to Rio de Janeiro and another on board a plane in a Tokyo airport. Fortunately, these bombs were found before detonation.

Japanese and American authorities quickly discovered that the explosion was a terrorist attack, but had difficulty finding suspects capable of such a sophisticated plan.⁵⁴ Eventually, Western intelligence agencies exposed al Umari's organization and launched an aggressive intelligence campaign against it.

Al Umari remained determined to target the aviation industry and to cause massive casualties among Americans, Israelis, and anyone who flew with them to and from Israel. In other words, he continued the original strategy of Haddad's organization while improving its methods. Al Umari continued to plan and execute innovative operations against the aviation system, even while he was being pursued by the West. In December 1983, al Umari sent a British woman to Israel with a suitcase – unknown to her – equipped with Semtex-type explosives and a barometric fuse that was supposed to detonate shortly after takeoff.⁵⁵ The woman boarded an El Al plane leaving Tel-Aviv on its way to London, with 260 passengers aboard. However, the bomb, which went undetected by Israeli airline security, did not explode as planned. When the woman arrived in London, she claimed the suitcase and took it with her, still unaware of the explosives it contained. On the same day, security personnel in Italy noticed that a Palestinian did not board his scheduled flight to New York, even though he had already checked his luggage. This made security suspicious, so they removed the missing man's suitcase from the plane before takeoff. When they inspected the suitcase, knowledge about May 15's bomb designs allowed them to discover the explosives and the barometric fuse. It appears that al Umari tried to carry out two, nearly simultaneous, major attacks.⁵⁶

Al Umari later launched several other attacks, including an attempted bombing of an El Al flight from Berlin to Tel Aviv and a similar attempt against a Lufthansa aircraft. However, attention from Western intelligence agencies was inhibiting his organization's ability to operate. Eventually, Western intelligence discovered the link between al Umari's group and the Iraqi government. Western pressure and several botched operations led the Iraqis to drop their support of al Umari. By 1985, the May 15 Organization was no longer operational.

Conclusion

The PFLP pioneered strategic innovations starting in the late 1960's, adopting new patterns of behavior radically different from those seen before. These new behaviors perfectly fit the definition of terrorist innovation offered by Crenshaw⁵⁷ and serve as a useful proof-of-concept. A combination of external structural factors and managerial ambitions within the organization allowed the PFLP's

⁵³ Ibid. 56.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 59-60.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 131.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 132-133.

⁵⁷ In her article *Innovation: Decision Points in the Trajectory of Terrorists*, Martha Crenshaw states that "Strategic innovation involves significant points of novelty in the historical development of campaigns of armed resistance, those shifts that change the fundamental pattern of terrorist challenges to political authority. Such transformations in the modes of armed struggle probably require a new conception of strategic effectiveness. That is, strategic innovation requires both a new goal and a new way of relating operations to that goal."

commanders to develop a groundbreaking offensive policy and to expand its range of targets exponentially. Making the international public the target audience for their attacks – rather than the Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab publics as they had before – was a significant conceptual evolution in terrorist strategy.

This evolution resulted from the PFLP's belief that it could violently coerce the global community to dramatically change its attitude to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and force the outside world to intervene on Palestinians' behalf. Through this new brand of attack, the PFLP hoped to induce the world to regard the Palestinians as a nation in exile—rather than refugees to be resettled in Arab countries—and to treat them accordingly.

The colossal defeat Israel handed Arab nations during the Six-Day War, along with the subsequent failure of guerrilla warfare in the newly occupied territories, caused the PFLP to construct a new paradigm, pursuing Palestinian nationalist goals within the broader vision of international revolution.

The longstanding partnership and great trust between PFLP leader George Habash and his operations chief, Waddia Haddad, became a central component in the PFLP's ability to develop a new and revolutionary terrorist strategy. These factors also allowed Haddad to implement this strategy with the full backing of the organization's leader and to receive the necessary resources to fully support it.

That the PFLP and Waddia Haddad were able to personally procure extensive training, funding, logistical support, and shelter from several Arab regimes, as well as the Soviet Union, significantly increased their ability to run an expansive global campaign for an extended period of time. Haddad's leadership style, his creativity, his deep personal involvement in planning and management, his dedicated terrorist unit, and his independent faction are what fostered the innovative tactical approach employed by the PFLP and its offshoots. For nearly a decade, terrorist attacks planned and executed at the international level were methodical, intensive, daring, and lethal, making international terrorism a permanent and significant factor on the international stage, and whose tactics were copied by Palestinian and other groups for years to come.

Choosing the aviation industry as the central target for attacks perfectly suited the goals of the organization. Hijacking airplanes was the first step. This was soon followed by a series of tactical innovations (defined by Crenshaw as “changes in method rather than strategic conceptualization... typically involv[ing] new weapons or targets... occur[ing] within strategies rather than replacing them”). Initially, attacks against airplanes used RPGs as airliners were landing or taking off. Next, the PFLP continued by planting bombs on planes, attacking planes and travelers on the ground, and finally attacking airline counters.⁵⁸ This tactical expansion was wholly organic and suited the main idea: putting this central, multi-national, highly lucrative branch of the global economy squarely in the organization's crosshairs. The attack on aviation guaranteed that media attention would be secured and that the economy of developed nations would suffer. Through this new approach, world leaders and the global community would take notice of the Palestinian issue.

The scope of the organization's strategy dynamically and continually expanded as its operations succeeded. Along with the initial motivation to move into the international arena, these operations

⁵⁸ Crenshaw, Martha. *Innovation: Decision Points in the Trajectory of Terrorism*. Prepared for the Conference on “Trajectories of Terrorist Violence in Europe,” March 9-11, 2001, Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

were also dedicated to serving the goals of international revolution and the PFLP's Marxist-Leninist ideology. The organization's cooperation with foreign terrorist organizations was an expression of this ideology (although it also constituted payment for services rendered by these organizations). Terrorist attacks against Arab targets also expressed this spirit and served the goals of the so-called "revolutionary" Arab states which supported the PFLP against the "reactionary" Arab regimes. The motives for these attacks included securing the release of comrades who had been arrested while working with the organization.

This case study suggests a set of features that organizations must exhibit in order to be considered truly innovative. Beyond the simple use of innovative tactics, organizations must (almost always) possess some or all of the following features, which shape the character of their innovation:

- First, a state of distress which derives from a sense of marginality and an enduring lack of progress, causing frustration and leading towards a desire to drastically change the situation.
- Second, a determined, cohesive (or centralist) leadership, which supports and enables innovation.
- Third, a charismatic, entrepreneurial leadership, with high operational capabilities, that can inspire innovation.
- Fourth, successful operations based on innovative planning.
- Fifth, influence that outlasts the organization over the long run.

Many of the nations targeted by the PFLP's new strategy did not readily identify the revolution it represented, which contributed significantly to the spread of the PFLP's methods and the continued utility of terrorism today. One of the reasons for this slow reaction was the lack of understanding regarding the principles of international terrorism, the ideology in which these principles were rooted, and a widespread belief that giving in to the demands of terrorist organizations would placate them. This led other organizations around the world to adopt the PFLP strategy, imitating and improving upon its methods. Other countries, such as Israel, developed both defensive and offensive countermeasures against the sources of international terrorism to interdict and prevent attacks.

Along with the success of the PFLP and its influence on other Palestinian groups, its international operations created tensions within the organization itself, with its colleagues and competitors in the Palestinian camp, as well as with the nations who'd suffered from its attacks. All of these factors led the Haddad faction to break away from the main group and embark upon an independent career sponsored by patron states. Countermeasures enacted in response to Haddad's tactics foiled many of his operations, led to the imprisonment of his comrades and, eventually, the early death of this innovator and leader of international terrorist actions. For a number of years after his death, Haddad's successors enacted tactically innovative operations similar to those Haddad himself had launched, but were ultimately neutralized by a wide spread counter-terrorist campaign that included intelligence and political action against sponsoring states.

In retrospect, seen from a contemporary perspective, it can be said that locating innovative terrorist initiatives and their agents before disaster strikes is a difficult and complex challenge, which requires the ability to identify those groups or networks prone to strategic innovation.

Close surveillance of terrorist groups with a revolutionary agenda and a particularly destructive record, which display innovative tendencies and experiment with inventive tactics, will allow security forces to focus their efforts and isolate such groups from other organizations around the world. This can be done only through a deep understanding of the ideology, world view, inner discourse, and state of mind among the leaders such groups. Close analysis of these organizations' operational leaders has critical importance; this would allow security forces to isolate these organizations before, or shortly after, they begin their innovative campaign, ensuring that, even if they do succeed, they will not inspire others to copy their tactics, as happened with the PFLP.

It appears today that there are two potential areas in which certain terrorist networks are moving towards innovation. The first is CBRN operations – chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear attacks. The second consists of operations against critical infrastructures (such as those which control mass transit systems, energy, and communications facilities), plus economic and trade hubs. As the dramatic 9/11 attacks have already proven, terrorists sometimes develop innovations that are relatively simple yet surprising in their tactical originality and daring—innovations that are considered “illogical” even though their success is obvious even to the unbelieving eyes of intelligence agencies.

One of the inescapable conclusions of these cases is that, despite their differing characteristics, the necessary preparations left a trail that could have been detected in advance, or at least understood in its systemic context after the fact, leading to a swift response to prevent future attacks. A lack of willingness to quickly and effectively confront the sources of international terrorism and to eliminate innovative leaders from the arena is what gives terrorist innovation enough breathing space to become routine. If an organization's methods are successful and demonstrate that imitation will generate results at a low cost while advancing the organization's agenda, innovation is likely to persist.