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Can Hamas Disrupt Commercial Flights to Israel?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Hamas has repeatedly threatened to disrupt commercial flights to Israel, a threat intended to deter Israel whenever a violent round of hostilities erupts. This threat harkens back to the flight ban that was imposed on Israel during 2014's Operation Protective Edge following a Hamas rocket attack on Yahud. While the flight ban was more a reflection of the Obama administration's desire to put political pressure on Israel than a reflection of genuine safety concerns, Israeli decision makers do seem to consider the Hamas threat to Ben-Gurion Airport to be viable. In fact, it is more a propaganda message than a concrete threat.

During the last short round of hostilities between Hamas and Israel (November 12-13, 2018), the Islamist organization's spokesperson threatened to launch long-range rockets towards Tel Aviv as well as towards Ben-Gurion Airport. The Israeli Airports Authority adjusted flight routes to Ben-Gurion for incoming flights in response to the Hamas threat.

This was not the first time Hamas has threatened to disrupt regular commercial flights to Israel by mentioning Ben-Gurion as a potential target. Hamas is well aware that the airport, as the main venue into Israel, is a spectacular strategic asset, so a deterrent message regarding the airport is likely to be taken seriously by the Israeli authorities.

Hamas did, in fact, enjoy a remarkable success during 2014's Operation Protective Edge by dramatically shaking up aerial traffic into Israel. The group launched a long-range rocket that hit the town of Yahud, which is one mile away from Ben-Gurion. Hamas learned that it can leverage flight restrictions to its advantage, even if only as a propaganda factor. If it so much as mentions Ben-Gurion Airport in the context of potential retaliation targets, Israel has to take notice and will therefore be deterred.

Technically speaking, Hamas missiles and rockets are indeed capable of reaching a radius beyond 70 km, potentially threatening much of Israel. This was demonstrated in 2014, though most of the missiles/rockets fired towards Tel Aviv were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome. Still, it is rational to wonder whether this hazard turned out to be a critical factor that caused Israeli decision makers to advocate for military restraint even as Hamas's provocations were arrogant and bloody.

In practical terms, the flight bans imposed in 2014 by the US FAA and later by the European Aviation Safety Agency (July 23-24) were drastically and needlessly overdramatic. Israeli Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz called them "unnecessary" on the grounds that "Ben-Gurion Airport is safe and completely guarded...there is no reason to hand terror a prize."

Ben-Gurion Airport is Israel's gateway to the rest of the world, servicing more than 90% of the country's incoming and outgoing passengers. The flight bans therefore had a profound psychological effect on the country, in addition to the economic damage inflicted on the tourism business.

On July 23, 2014, the US State Department spokesman said, "The FAA's notice was issued to protect American citizens and American carriers. The only consideration in issuing the notice was the safety and security of our citizens." In fact, the US flight ban was a blunt sanction encouraged and possibly initiated by the Obama administration to send a clear message to Israel to immediately cease the military operation in Gaza.

For the Obama administration, the FAA decision was the perfect instrument with which to pressure Israel. Obama made his own standpoint on the conflict perfectly clear at the time, stating that he would like to see an "immediate cessation of hostilities." In an interview with CNBC on July 24, 2014, he said of the flight ban: "I think what happened here was in light of some scary moments a couple of days ago, the FAA took some prudent action."

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) responded by questioning the administration's decision to ban flights to Israel while at the same time announcing continuing aid that would be funneled to Hamas. "Aiding Hamas while simultaneously isolating Israel does two things," he said. "One, it helps our enemy. Two, it hurts our ally."

Cruz went on: "President Obama has just used a federal regulatory agency to launch an economic boycott on Israel in order to try to force our ally to comply with his foreign policy demands...Security concerns in Israel are hardly breaking news, and given the exceptional challenge Israel faces, Ben-Gurion

has rightly earned the reputation as one of the safest airports in the world due to the aggressive security measures implemented by the Israeli government.”

Michael Bloomberg, New York’s former mayor, said: “The flight restrictions are a mistake that hands Hamas an undeserved victory and should be lifted immediately. I strongly urge the FAA to reverse course and permit US airlines to fly to Israel.”

With time, it has become apparent that the FAA’s travel ban into and out of Ben-Gurion Airport in 2014 was never justified, raising tough questions about the motives behind the US move.

Civil aviation regulations worldwide are based on the professional guidance of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a UN specialized agency that sets global aviation standards. The ICAO is the umbrella body that clarifies the legal framework governing the role and responsibilities of states and airlines with respect to risks to civil aviation arising in national airspace.

The shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 on July 17, 2014 by a Russian missile from Ukraine was a chilling warning on the dangers of unsettled airspace. “War zones come and war zones go and it’s certainly true that airlines are taking a more conservative approach since MH17,” said Jan Richter, an analyst at the Germany-based Jet Airliner Crash Data Evaluation Center.

That incident clearly manifested the weakness of the ICAO as an authoritative body. A senior ICAO official admitted that “different political perspectives” among member states have rendered the ICAO “unable to provide a common global assessment of risk for aviation operations.”

According to the ICAO’s latest Conflict Zones Risk Information report, based upon October 19, 2015 clarifications, the three threats posed to civil aviation operations near conflict zones are 1) surface to air missiles (SAMs); 2) man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS); and 3) air to air attacks. There is not a single word about rockets or ballistic missiles.

Having excluded those weapons as threats to civil aviation, questions should be raised when the ICAO as well as state air safety bodies impose flight prohibitions upon Israel whenever rockets and/or ballistic missiles are involved in the battle arena.

A flight ban was put in place in January-February 1991 during Operation Desert Storm in Iraq. While the threat cited to justify the ban in 2014 was rockets from Gaza, the threat cited in 1991 was ballistic missiles from Iraq.

The double standard put on display during these events was manifested once again very recently, when ballistic missile barrages were launched on an almost daily basis by the Yemenite Houthi rebels towards several Saudi main airports (King Khaled International Airport north of Riyadh, as well as the Abha, Najran, and Jizan regional airports). No flight prohibitions were even considered in light of these attacks. Where Israel is concerned, the flight bans reflect the Pavlovian conditioning inherent in international standards.

The flight prohibition enforced on Ben-Gurion Airport in 2014 was a form of political pressure exerted on Israel by the Obama administration to stop the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip, not a reflection of genuine safety concerns. This suggests that Hamas threats to “close the Israeli sky” are little more than mere propaganda.

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