

## NO MAN'S LAND: POLITICS IN THE SKY<sup>1</sup>

1958

### ENTER THE JETSET AND A NEW WORD "HIJACK!"

From the get-go, hijacking planes had strong potential for political exploitation. With their capacity for speed and lift-off, planes were able to transgress political boundaries and undermine the concept of nationhood.<sup>2</sup> Just after the Peruvian revolution, PanAm pilot Byron Richards discovered how politics and piloting fly side by side. His plane was seized by the world's first skyjackers when he landed into Arequipa as part of his regular mail run on 31 February 1931, "to drop propaganda over cities in Peru".<sup>3</sup>

Between 1947 and 1950 there was a rash of hijackings involving the crossing of the Iron Curtain—the hostile divide between the "Eastern bloc" and the "capitalist West". Vocabulary evolved accordingly: skyjackers fleeing from east to west were "freedom fighters" or "political refugees", while those seizing planes to go the other way were branded as criminals and spies. By 1958, *The Times* had adopted the term 'hijack' to describe the act of commandeering a plane.<sup>4</sup> The word was popularized during the Prohibition in the US when one bootlegger, while robbing another, would invariably say: "*Hi, Jack*, raise your hands!"

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: Asselberghs, H. & Grimonprez, J., *Nergensland* (Leuven: Dietsche Warande & Belfort, 1997) and Grimonprez, J., "No Man's Land", in *Inflight Magazine* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 10–53

<sup>2</sup> See Beer, G., "The Island and the Aeroplane: the Case of Virginia Woolf", in *Nation and Narration*, ed. H.K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1992), 265–90

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Phillips, D., *Skyjack: The Story of Air Piracy* (London: Harrap, 1973)

<sup>4</sup> *The Times* (19 February 1958)



*Raffaele Minichiello, Hijacker, Rome, November 1969*

## **1 NOVEMBER 1969 FIRST TRANSATLANTIC HIJACK**

Vietnam vet Raffaele Minichiello forces a TWA Flight 85 out of Los Angeles to make a detour across two continents and an ocean. Two days and 6,869 miles later the plane lands in Rome, accomplishing the world's longest and first transatlantic skyjack. On the tarmac he convinces police to give him a getaway car, and speeding away in it, Minichiello manages to outrun the Italian police. The car is later found abandoned in the Appian hills of the Italian countryside as helicopters and search dogs unsuccessfully continue to track him down. It is only five hours later that Minichiello is found. He is taking haven in a country church— The Sanctuary of Divine Love. He is wearing Bermuda shorts, and it is his 20th birthday.

In Italy, Raffaele's skyjacking is acclaimed as the most exciting event since the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Touted as victim of the imperialist American war machine, he becomes an instant celebrity. Marriage proposals pour in. Movie starlets tearfully confess their love, and Minichiello is offered a leading role in an Italian spaghetti Western. He spent \$15.50 on his plane ticket.



*Anonymous, Hijacker, Panama, January 1970*

**1969**

**HIJACK INN:**

**CUBANS WINE AND DINE AMERICANO**

By the end of 1969 the restaurant and gift shop at the Havana airport expands their business to take care of the unexpected flux of visitors brought in by the skyjackers. Landing fees are inflated and the runway is enlarged to take care of the unscheduled joyrides to the Caribbean island. When Rudolfo Rivera Rios makes history with the first hijack of the 747, his destination of choice is Cuba. Upon landing, Premier Fidel Castro himself hurries to José Martí Airport to admire the jumbo jet. While the hijacker gets off the plane and disappears, Captain Watkins gets out to chat with Castro. Everyone else stays on board. Castro is fascinated by the gigantic aircraft. Captain Watkins asks him if he would like to go on board to see what it looks like inside. Castro graciously declines.

—"I would probably scare the passengers," he says. Could the hijacker get his luggage off the plane though? Sorry, the 747 requires special baggage-handling equipment that is not available in Havana. The man's luggage will have to be shipped back on another flight.

A routine pattern is established: hijackers are lodged in the "Casa de Transitos" ("Hijacker's House") in Havana's Siboney district. Pilots and crew rest briefly, smoke cigars, and then fly their empty planes back to the US. Cubans wine and dine the Americano tourists and take them on a sightseeing tour of socialist Cuba. After this memorable side trip, generally enjoyed by the skyjack jet set, they are boarded on a return trip to the US, laden with rum, cigars, revolutionary literature, sombreros and pictures of Che Guevara. Castro forwards the bills to the American airline companies: for every hijacked airliner to Cuba an additional \$2,500 to \$3,000 cover charge is demanded for landing fees, fuel, plus food and accommodation for the passengers.



*Leila Khaled, Palestinian Hijacker, August 1969*

**29 AUGUST 1969**

**7-MINUTE DETOUR OVER OCCUPIED HOMELAND<sup>5</sup>**

A stylishly clad Leila Khaled, in white bell-bottoms and matching hat, boards the flight from Beirut to Rome. The person sitting next to her is a clean-cut sociable American on his way to New York. She knows that Americans, like most other tourists, like to make casual conversation about everything under the sun. He must be bored, and he wants to talk.

—"Where are you going?" he asks.

—"I am going to Rome," she replies.

—"Why are you going to Rome?" he continues.

Khaled pauses momentarily to fabricate an answer, and says with simulated shyness,

—"I am going to meet my fiancé who is coming from London to meet me in Rome in a few days."

—"How on earth would an Arab girl be going to Rome to meet her fiancé alone and get married?" he asks.

In truth, Leila Khaled is on her way to Rome in order to hijack the TWA Boeing-707 that will be leaving for Tel Aviv in a couple of days.

Once airborne her other accessories appear: a pistol and a hand grenade. As she makes her way towards the cockpit, her companion, Salim Issawi, announces that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) is now in command of the very first American airliner hijacked in the Middle East. Captain Carter, looking down the barrel of a pistol, is obliged to agree.

—"What shall I do now?" asks Carter.

—"Let's take a seven-minute tour of the fatherland."

The image of her father appears before Leila's eyes, while she can hear his voice saying, "When will we return home?" Her whole world comes together. She is silent. She looks out at the greenery and mountains of Palestine. She can see Tel Aviv below. She weeps out of affection and longing.

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<sup>5</sup> Extract from Khaled, L., *My People Shall Live: Autobiography of a Revolutionary* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973)





*Kozo Okamoto, Japanese Red Army Commando, Tel Aviv, June 1972*

### **31 MARCH 1970 SKYJACK CAPTURES TELLY!**

Tokyo's streets are deserted as millions watch the very first hijacking broadcast live on television. Nine Japanese Red Army members hijack a Japanese domestic flight to start the 84-hour long saga. They are all students, conservatively dressed in coats and ties and look for all the world like young office workers. But instead of briefcases they carry samurai swords, wielding them like warriors of old as they rush down the aisle. Their demand? To be flown to North Korea. Fighter planes accost the airliner in the sky and escort it in the direction of an airport, which identifies itself from the control tower as Pyongyang. They look as though they might be North Korean planes, and perhaps that is what all or most of the passengers think they are. In actual fact, they are South Korean, and the airport is South Korea's Gimpo International Airport, disguised as a North Korean air base for the occasion. Communist banners replace western flags, English signs are removed and two trucks of airborne troops in stolen North Korean uniforms roll in. Nobody on board asks any questions; South Korean skies look no different to North Korean ones. Floodlights are blazing as the planes approaches. It is not yet dark but soon will be, and perhaps the blaze of light will help to fool the eye and blot out the view beyond the airfield. In front of the plane official greeters wave "Welcome to Pyongyang" placards. Loudspeakers blare out the same message. Soldiers with smiling faces and communist insignia take up positions alongside the plane as if forming a guard of honour. They are joined by girls carrying bouquets of flowers. The hijackers are suspicious. The set-up turns sour when one of the hijackers turns on his transistor radio and hears American jazz. The hijackers refuse to disembark. The waiting game commences. The aircraft cabin gets unbearably cramped, the toilets have reached their overflow point. The men, tied to their seats, are extremely uncomfortable and the women help them by mopping their brows. Men with no women nearby are out of luck. A new word enters the Japanese vocabulary: "Haijaku".



*Mouna Abdel Majid, Palestinian Hijacker, Amman, August 1970*

## **6 SEPTEMBER 1970 YOUR WORDS HAVE REACHED MY EARS<sup>6</sup>**

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine increases the stakes by turning skyjacking into a worldwide political phenomenon and making Palestine into a household name. The Six-Day War leaves thousands of Palestinians homeless and without a voice. The impact of previous televised hijacks is not lost on the PFLP. In skyjacking, they see a weapon with which to make their cause known to an international audience. The strategy is simple: turn your cause into prime time. The method: hold passengers hostage in full view of TV cameras and negotiate with political authorities while the world watches. The stage is then set for the most daring plot in the history of civil aviation: Skyjack Sunday Over Europe!

A total of five planes are hijacked with "Revolution Airstrip" in the Jordanian desert as destination. The demand: the release of imprisoned PFLP commandos. Two jets make it to the desert, the 3rd jet is blown up on Cairo runway. The 4th plane hijack is foiled and two-time hijacker Leila Khaled is captured. A 5th plane is seized—the new demand: Khaled's release. *The Times* proclaims 1970 as "Year of the Hijacker".

*Palestinians learned geography by going from one airport to another.<sup>7</sup>*  
Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*

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<sup>6</sup> Sheikh Muhammed ibn Rashid Al-Maktoum, Dubai Airport control tower, replying to hijackers aboard a diverted JAL, July 1973, in *Hijack, 144 Lives in the Balance*, S. Bunsei (Los Angeles: Gateway Publishers, 1975)

<sup>7</sup> Genet, J., *Prisoner of Love* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1992)



*Leila Khaled, Palestinian Hijacker, Amman, August 1970*

## **6 SEPTEMBER 1970 SECOND RENDEZVOUS WITH HISTORY<sup>8</sup>**

*One day my eldest son, Badr, came home from kindergarten and asked me if I was a thief. His teacher had told him I had hijacked an airplane, and now he was wondering where I was hiding it.*  
Leila Khaled<sup>9</sup>

After a celebrity tour of the Arab world, Leila Khaled undergoes facial plastic surgery to prepare her for her second rendezvous with history. Ever since the 1969 TWA hijack episode, Khaled's picture plasters the walls of airports worldwide, yet there is hardly a glimmer of recognition as the veteran skyjacker boards an El Al flight bound for New York. This time her companion is Patrick Arguello and she wears a "wonderbra" in which two grenades are concealed. They attempt to divert the plane to join their comrades at a deserted military airstrip in the Jordanian desert. On the infamous quadruple "Skyjack Sunday" the El Al hijack is foiled. Patrick Arguello is shot and killed, while Leila Khaled is apprehended.

Captive in a London prison, Khaled's capture gives the PFLP a headache: the British refuse to exchange Miss Khaled for non-British hostages. Realizing they do not have any British nationals among those in the Jordanian desert, the PFLP decide to seize three days later a 5th, British plane, with which to negotiate for her release. It is the first British commercial airliner to be hijacked and is christened "Leila" in her honour.

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<sup>8</sup> Extract from Khaled, L., *My People Shall Live: Autobiography of a Revolutionary* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973)

<sup>9</sup> Excerpt from an interview in *Der Spiegel* (November 1996): "Die Waffe gab mir Würde", cited in *Former Hijacker Leila Khaled on Palestine, Peace, and Death*, ed. J. Hogrefe (trans. K. Lum), 158–62





*Rima Tannous Eissa, Palestinian Hijacker, Tel Aviv Prison, May 1972*

## **8 MAY 1972 BLACK SEPTEMBER MASQUE!**

Incognito, in wigs and forged passports, four Palestinians board a Sabena jet at Brussels Airport. Of the four, two are Palestinian women, Rima Tannous Eissa, 21, and Therese Halaseh, 19. Both ladies wear special girdles made of highly explosive material; each have a hand grenade hidden in their beauty-cases with the detonators tucked in their bras. Approaching Sarajevo, the girls go to the washroom to remove their girdles: Rima handles the explosives, while Therese announces to the passengers over the intercom that they are being skyjacked by the Black September unit of the Palestinian guerrilla organization. "As you can see," Captain Levy tells the 90 passengers, "we have friends aboard."<sup>10</sup>

Touching down in Tel Aviv, the "friends" demand the release of 317 Palestinian commandos held in Israeli prisons. They warn that if their demands are not met, they will blow up the plane with the passengers still on board. They send Captain Levy over to the terminal with a sample of the hijacker's explosives to show they mean business. He does more by telling the Israelis that, crucially, nothing is blocking the airplane's emergency doors. In the first successful assault carried out on a passenger airliner, Israeli soldiers disguised as airplane mechanics and who include Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu, storm the plane and kill the two male commandos and one passenger. The female hijackers are captured.

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<sup>10</sup> Hevesi, D., "Reginald Levy Is Dead at 88; Hailed as a Hero in a '72 Hijacking", in *The New York Times* (4 August 2010). Accessed 7 December 2010: [www.nytimes.com/2010/08/05/world/europe/05levy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/05/world/europe/05levy.html)





*Black Power family hijack, Algiers, January 1972*

## **10 NOVEMBER 1972**

### **FBI IN SWIMMING TRUNKS**

In 1972, swimming trunks become standard uniform for FBI agents during hijack situations. Three black men, Henry Jackson and his two half-brothers—Lewis Moore and Melvin Cale—hijack Captain William Haas's Southern Airways Flight 49 out of Birmingham, Alabama. Paranoid that the other male passengers could be concealing weapons, the hijackers have them all strip down to their underwear. The women are ordered to throw their purses into the aisle, during which time dinner is served. The hijack turns into a two-day ordeal across the US, Canada, Cuba and the Atlantic; making nine forced stops, two of them in Havana. During one such stop in Chattanooga, the hijackers demand that money, two dozen buckets of fried chicken, parachutes, seven bulletproof vests, pep pills and a six-pack of beer be delivered to the plane by a FBI agent in his swimming trunks.

It turns out that Jackson and Moore have a bone to pick with the mayor and police of Detroit. They had unsuccessfully sued the city for \$4 million on the count of police brutality and could hardly believe it when the city offered to settle for \$25: for them, it is clearly a matter of race discrimination. It is so that they decide on their hijack, with a ransom demand of \$10 million. They threaten to crash-land into the atomic plant at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, if their demands are not met.



*Sana'a Muheidli, Sacrificial Marthyr, Beirut, February 1985*

## **APRIL 1985**

### **GET KILLED, AND MAYBE THEY WILL NOTICE YOU<sup>11</sup>**

*When I read in the papers about a virgin of sixteen blowing herself up in the middle of a group of Israeli soldiers, it doesn't surprise me very much. It's the lugubrious yet joyful preparations that intrigue me. What string did the old woman or girl have to pull to detonate the grenades? How was the bodice arranged to make the girl's body look womanly and enticing enough to rouse suspicion in soldiers with a reputation for intelligence?*

Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*<sup>12</sup>

The Shi'ite faction National Resistance Front (PPS), based in South Lebanon, announces in April 1985 that 17-year-old Sana'a Mehaidli has become the first woman suicide car bomber to perish in action. Sana'a Muheidli is a member of the "Brides of Blood", a team of teenage girls trained for suicide missions. Before she sets out to meet her fate, she records a suicide note by way of video, explaining her actions:

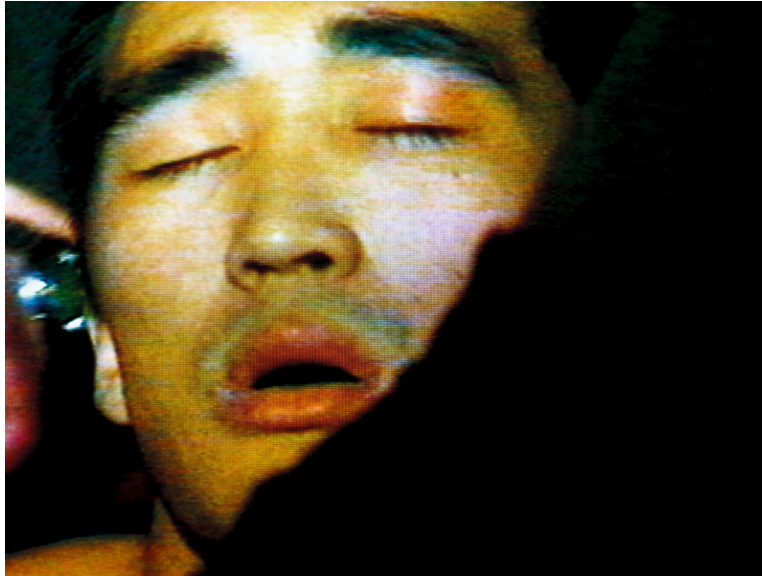
"I am very relaxed to go on this operation because I am carrying out the duty of my people. I decided on self-sacrifice and martyrdom for the sake of liberation of our land and our people, because I have seen the tragedy of our people from the humiliation of occupation and oppression, the killing of children, women and old men."

She exhorts her mother not to mourn her death, rather, "be merry, and let your joy explode as if it were my wedding day". Sana'a tells her parents that she is off to buy lipstick. She then drives off in a white Peugeot stuffed with TNT, crashing it into an Israeli convoy. She kills herself and two soldiers.

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<sup>11</sup> DeLillo, D., *Mao II* (New York: Viking, 1991)

<sup>12</sup> Genet, J., *Prisoner of Love* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1992)



*Anonymous, St. Petersburg, February 1993*

## **1980s**

### **TERRORISM IS WHAT THE BAD GUYS DO**

June 1985: Beirut–Algiers: Shi'ites commandeer TWA Flight 847. Media spectacles deflects from Reagan administration's clandestine activities in Central America: the one American hostage killed in the Middle East eclipses 10,000 people killed in Central America.

Then in 1986, terrorism peaks: 25 US dead from terrorism, 12,000 more die from slipping... in bathtubs.

4 April 1986: Nezar Hindawi puts unsuspecting (and pregnant) girlfriend on a flight to Israel; her bag lined with enough Semtex to blow the plane up. Inside the bag is a pocket calculator fitted with a detonator. Luckily, she is busted. Rumours of a double agent double cross. The official version is that the bomb was allegedly made by Syrian intelligence operatives and passed to Hindawi through his Syrian handlers. However, French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac cites the West German Government as authority for the alleged involvement of the Israeli Secret Service as a provocation designed to embarrass Syria and destabilize the Assad regime.<sup>13</sup> The Heathrow bomb was never intended to go off, and its discovery by an Israeli security guard a mere charade.

## **1993**

### **FROM CHECHNYA WITH LOVE: NEW NATIONS, NEW JACKS**

Eastern block topples, skyjacking on the rise: "To you westerners, borders represent barriers and limits, to us they represent opportunities," claims a Chechen terrorist.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Le Monde (11 November 1986)

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Akahane, T., "Governing the Last Continent?", in Subetage (Vienna: Sabotage Communications, 1999)

*Stars, that's what we were. Japan, Norway, Düsseldorf, the United States, Holland – don't be surprised if I count them up on my fingers – England, Belgium, Korea, Sweden, places we'd never even heard of and couldn't find on the map – they all sent people to film us and photograph us and interview us. "Camera", "in shot", "tracking shot", "voice off" – but gradually the fedayeen found themselves "out of shot" and learned that the visitors spoke "voice off".*

*Whenever Europeans looked at us their eyes shone. Now I understand why. It was with desire, because their looking at us produced a reaction in our bodies before we realized it. Even with our backs turned we could feel your eyes drilling through the backs of our necks. We automatically adopted a heroic and therefore attractive pose. Legs, thighs, chest, neck – everything helped to work the charm. We weren't aiming to attract anyone in particular, but since your eyes provoked us and you'd turned us into stars, we responded to your hopes and expectations. – "But you'd turned us into monsters, too. You called us terrorists!"*

*Israel calls everyone in the PLO terrorists, leaders, and fedayeen alike. They show no sign of the admiration they must feel for you. – "As far as terrorism is concerned, we're nothing compared to them. Or compared to the Americans and the Europeans. If the whole world's a kingdom of terror we know whom to thank. But you terrorize by proxy. At least the terrorists I'm talking about risk their own skins. That's the difference."*