

WHAT THE FLIGHT 253 CASE TEACHES US ON AIR SECURITY AND AL-QAEDA

*By Claude MONIQUET
President of ESISC*

The attempt to blow up a U.S. airliner, on Friday, December 25 is teaching us **various lessons** we must learn if we want to be more effective in the fight against terrorism.

First of all: **8 years after September 11, flight security remains largely virtual and theoretical.** Hundreds of millions if not billions have been spent in securing airports and airplanes. But it didn't prevent Richard Reid ("Shoe Bomber") to enter a Paris-Miami flight in December 2001, with an explosive charge hidden in his shoe. The attempt failed. But eight years later, increased security was absolutely ineffective in preventing Umar Farouk Abdul Muttalab to enter another plane with another explosive charge. To think that the "suspect" traveled through two airports (Lagos and Schipol) and boarded on two planes doesn't make the facts easier to understand. Once again, **the tragedy was avoided thanks to a "technical" failure" and the decisive and courageous action of passengers and crew members. Not by the "security" and the billions consumed.**

Better equipment, better trained personals, better procedures are certainly compulsory if we really want to have an acceptable security level while boarding a plane. **But it is also necessary to "think outside the box."** This includes humility and the courage to ask the right questions.

For instance, **and considering the fact that Israel is an obvious target for terrorism, why were El Al planes never hijacked or destroyed from inside for the 41 last years** (the only successful hijacking of an El Al Aircraft took place on July 23, 1969)? **Because Israelis don't rely exclusively on technique** (even if, for instance, El Al is the only company in the world to pass all luggage through a decompression chamber simulating pressure during flight): they extensively use intelligence database to check passengers, they train their security personal to "profile" them, they have efficient armed air-marshals on every single flight, and ...they routinely test the security at various airports (each day, somewhere in the world, an El-Al security team is challenged by undercover examiners). And they learn lessons....

It's the mixing of technique, intelligence, common sense and human security that reduce drastically the risk and makes El Al the "world's most secure airline" (as "Global Traveler" magazine named it in 2008).

The second lesson is about "al-Qaeda."

A few months ago, scores of "experts" told us that al-Qaeda was under heavy pressure in the AfPak (Afghanistan, Pakistan) area and on the run in Iraq and the Arabic Peninsula. Not to mention the "financial problems" of the organization.

A few months later, **al-Qaeda doesn't exactly look like a failed story** (unlike airplane security....): terrorism is back, on full scale in Iraq, the AfPak "war against terror" is not exactly a success story, Yemen and Somalia are more and more controlled by al-Qaeda followers, AQIM continues to be the most serious threat to North Africa and Europe and –

last but not least -, on December 25, al-Qaeda came close to killing hundreds of people in the Northwest plane and on the ground.

The reality and the level of the contacts between Mutalab and al-Qaeda is not the question: **the point is that al-Qaeda is far from agonizing and remains able to organize or inspire Jihadists worldwide.** The point is that **we don't understand the process of radicalization driving a young engineer coming from a respectable wealthy family to seat in a plane, a day of December with a bomb attached to his body.**

The point is that we rely on largely ineffective security measures, we are not winning the "long war" and are losing the battle for hearts and minds.

Everything is ready for new tragedies.

©ESISC 2009