



## TERRORIST BEHAVIOUR IN HOSTAGE TAKING SITUATIONS

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### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to set out the basic forms of terrorist hostage taking and to consider some of the issues they raise, not just for academic research but for those tasked with prevention or response. For those involved in academic research, the definition of what is and what is not terrorism has developed into a lengthy debate in its own right (see Schmid and Jongman, 1988; Schmid, 1993; Schmid, 2000). In summary, it has been reasonably agreed upon that it is not the identity of the person that determines the classification but the act itself, and that the key features of a terrorist incident are that it uses, or threatens to use, violence in order to create fear with the aim of affecting social or political change (see Wilson and Lemanski (2009) for a discussion of the issues).

It is clear that many hostage taking incidents do not fit this definition. For example, the taking of hostages in any form undoubtedly involves the threat of violence and the creation of fear to achieve the hostage takers' aims. However, when those aims are financial extortion or the meeting of personal demands, the incident does not technically fit the definition of terrorism. Nonetheless, for those tasked with managing or negotiating in hostage incidents, many of the issues they face are the same, regardless of the technical definition. For this reason, in this paper I will only refer to terrorists where the issue at hand applies specifically to terrorist hostage takers. In all other cases, I will talk about hostage takers.

There are three main forms of hostage taking; kidnapping, hijacking, barricade-siege, and each of them vary on a set of variables that can affect not just the hostage takers' behaviour but also the responses in terms of prevention, management or resolution. Table 1 shows some of the key features that distinguish between the three forms.



## HIJACKING

Although hijacking incidents can, and do, involve a range of transport types, the most publicised cases are hijacking of aircraft (or skyjackings). Aircraft hijackings attract the greatest media attention, and many researchers claim that this is the main aim of terrorist action (e.g. Rubin and Friedland, 1986). While hijacking of buses is also quite frequent they do not have the potential for international travel, and therefore escape, that aircraft provide, however, there are little or no security measures to prevent hostage takers from gaining access. Likewise, trains have been hijacked in the past, but their scope for flexibility in destination is even more limited, and once boarded they are probably better characterised as a static siege. One high profile case of the hijacking of a cruise liner exists, that of the Achille Lauro in 1985. This incident is remembered for the killing of a disabled passenger, but Rubin and Friedland (1986) contend that it was a ‘flop on the high seas’ because its location restricted live media coverage. Nonetheless, there is concern over the vulnerability of maritime traffic (Chalk, 2008) and maritime hostage taking for extortion is rife in certain areas of the world.

Table 1

Form of hostage incident	Hijack	Kidnap	Siege
Location	Known	Unknown	Known
Mobility	Mobile/static	Mobile/static	Static
Number of hostages	Large	Small	Large/small
Control	High need for control	Low need for control	High/low need for control
Planning/resources	High	Low	High
Risk to HT	High	Low	High



Table 1. Key characteristics in three forms of hostage taking (adapted from Wilson, 2000).

Taking aerial hijack as the norm here, Table 1 sets out its key components. An airliner typicality affords a large number of hostages, however, this also means that the hostage taker/s have a high need for control, which can be a factor in the way they an incident is conducted. Intuitively, one would assume that serious weaponry would be required in order to present a credible threat, but many hijackings are carried out with very limited resources. Similarly, high manpower would be the ideal, but here again lone hijackers are also quite frequent. It is difficult to board a plane with weaponry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and even more difficult to get a whole team of hijackers onto a plane. For lone hijackers this presents a risky situation, as they maybe overpowered by passengers or crew (see Wilson, 2003a for an account of passenger resistance). Thus, plane hijacking requires high levels of planning and resources, high levels of control over the passengers, and comes with high levels of risk. Almost all hijackers are killed or arrested. On the other hand, plane hijackings present the opportunity for mobility, which for terrorist hijackers can increase publicity and if successful can be ended in a country that is sympathetic to the cause allowing the potential for safe haven. In many cases the element of travel is the main motivating factor, with a large proportion of the post 1990s hijackers being motivated by issues such as asylum seeking (Wilson, 2005). However, the mobility of the situation is a potential problem for the authorities, and once a plane has landed, they will often try to avoid any further movement of the incident. Once the plane is grounded, the negotiations can be more focussed to include passenger release.



Figure 1

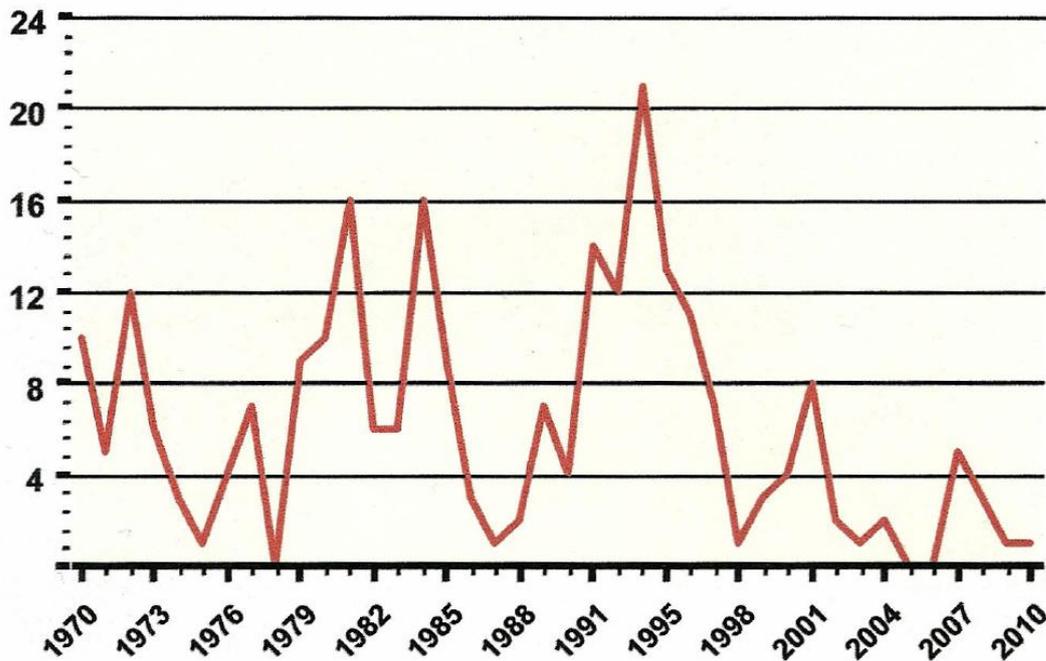


Figure 1. Frequency of aerial hijackings over time. (Data taken from the Global Terrorism Database GTD).

When we think of hijacking we tend to recall the most recent or the most dramatic incidents first and over-estimate the likelihood of their occurrence. In psychology this is a well documented phenomenon, referred to collectively as 'heuristics and biases' (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973, 1974). Those who are old enough to remember the major terrorist hijackings in the 1960s and 70s will probably remember from the media coverage scenes of planes sitting on the tarmac and passengers who were executed. More recently the hijackings of 9/11 have impacted on all our perceptions. These incidents were, or course, never intended to be about demands and negotiation. Nonetheless, they have had a powerful impact on our conceptualisation of hijack and may well have resulted in a public perception that hijackings are more dangerous than they really are (Wilson, 2003a). While any hijacking is undoubtedly very frightening for both those on board and those who have to negotiate a resolution, in statistical terms, the majority of plane hijackings end without loss of life. Whilst it is not possible to quantify the degree to which this is an outcome of successful



negotiation, we do know the consequences of negotiation break down. Of all the deaths and injuries that result as a consequence of plane hijackings far more are sustained during rescue (the 'storming' of a plane) than are a consequence of a hijacker killing the passengers or crew (Wilson, 2000).

Figure 2 shows the frequency by year of terrorist plane hijackings. The data are taken from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2011). Because of the definitional issues discussed at the start of this paper it is likely that a number more hijackings take place each year and but that they do not appear in this data as they are not classified as 'terrorist'. The results may be surprising to some as it is often the perception that plane hijacking has been eradicated by airport security measures.

The way that terrorist actions change over time is an interesting area of study in its own right. The decline in plane hijackings after the installation of metal detectors is well reported (see for example Landes, 1978), but researchers have examined how the increase in protective measures (target hardening) in one form of terrorist action can just move the activity to another type of target – a phenomenon known as transference or displacement (Laqueur, 1987, Enders and Sandler, 2006). After 9/11 there was a relatively long period where very few hijacks took place. I have written elsewhere about this dip and suggested that it may be the result not only of the very seriously increased security but a change in the perceptions of hijack by hijackers themselves. A large proportion of hijacks in current times are carried out by people with personal agendas (such as travel) and it is possible that the discussions surrounding plans to shoot hijacked airliners down may have impacted on their decisions to take their particular grievance to the skies (Wilson 2003a). Nonetheless, as Figure 2 shows, ten years on, and the frequency of aircraft hijackings has returned to its 'usual' annual rate.



## BARRICADE-SIEGE

The GTD figures on frequency for terrorist barricade siege are shown in Figure 2, and they reflect the relatively greater ease with which they can be carried out compared to plane hijackings. The ease of gaining access to a target does, of course, relate to the nature of the target selected. In the 1970s terrorist occupation (with hostages) of embassies and consulates was prevalent worldwide, but was greatly reduced following the fortification of such targets. Here again though, the concept of transference comes into play, and if 'official' targets are no longer accessible then terrorists may simply take over more accessible public places. Likewise, Enders and Sandler (2006) have suggested that since it is no longer easy to hold embassy personnel within the compound, there has been an increase in kidnappings of embassy personnel on their way to and from their workplace.

Figure 2

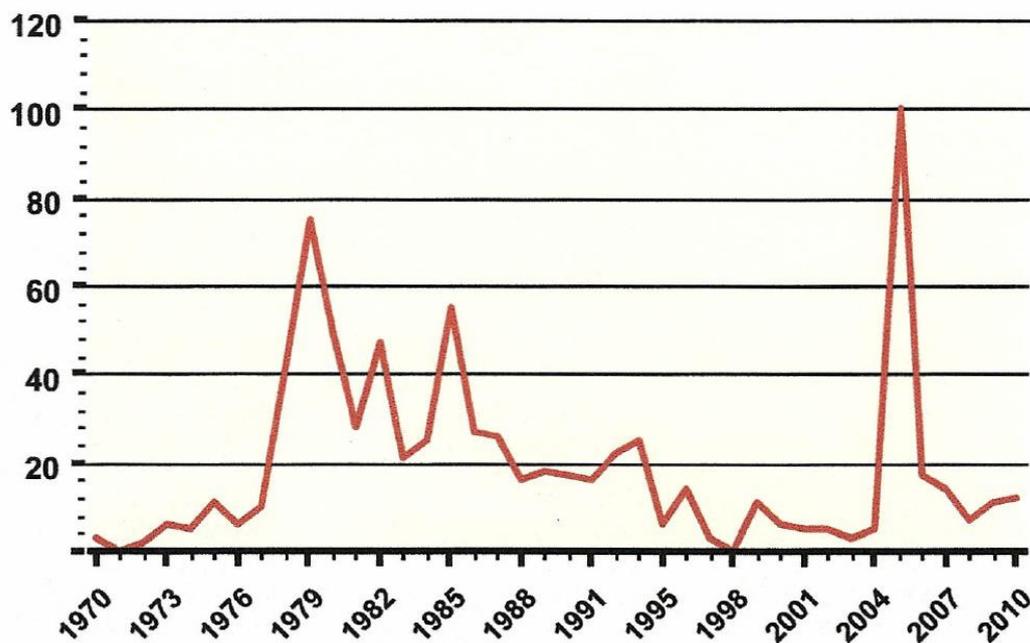


Figure 2. Frequency of barricade-siege over time. (Data taken from the Global Terrorism Database GTD).



Referring back to Table 1, barricade-siege has a very similar profile to plane hijackings, being a high risk, high resource intensive strategy at a known and static location. The need for control depends on the number of hostages taken. Siege is subject to the same problems and advantages for the authorities as a hijacking once grounded and static. They are both subject to media coverage which can present problems for the management of the incident. With respect to dealing with these large sieges, the most difficult decisions concern assessing the danger to the hostages and understanding whether negotiations are progressing toward a peaceful resolution. While Taylor (e.g. 2002) has done some important work in this area, further research is needed in order to support this kind of expert decision making, for example, identifying indices of risk and escalation based on empirical data analysis.

## **KIDNAP**

Figure 3 shows the data on the prevalence of terrorist kidnapping incidents over time as recorded by the GTD. The Figure shows that kidnapping is a huge problem and one that has increased dramatically in recent years. The size of the problem of kidnap is accompanied by a similarly large gap in our understanding of what goes on, and together they represent the biggest challenge for the psychology of hostage taking. It is extremely difficult to gain access to any information about what happens in kidnap and in order to advance theoretical understanding and practical insights in the area psychologists need to work closely with law enforcement and security agencies.

Referring back to Table 1, kidnappings present the greatest challenge to the authorities because they are both mobile, in that hostages can be moved from location to location, and usually held in an unknown location, meaning that the opportunity for intervention is reduced. Single hostages are easy to control by the hostage takers and they do not carry a great deal of risk to the hostage taker. If things are not working out the way they planned, unlike sieges, hostage takers can just release the hostage and retain their own anonymity.



Figure 3

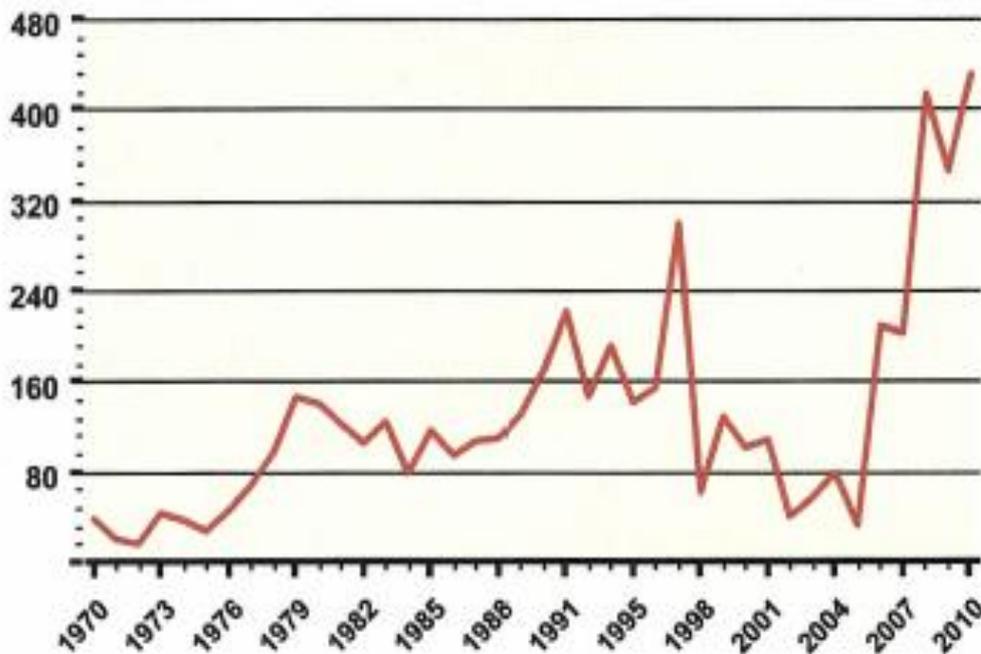


Figure 3. Frequency of terrorist Kidnapping over time. (Data taken from the Global Terrorism Database GTD).

### **HOSTAGE TAKING, BEHAVIOUR AND APPLIED RESEARCH**

There are numerous areas where psychological research can help gain a better understanding of terrorist hostage taking and therefore contribute to peaceful resolutions (see Wilson, 2003b for a review). In terms of targeting, research could help in understanding who is at risk, where and under which circumstances. Preparedness for surviving capture is an important area for those whose role, position, or job makes them a potential target, and recovery for released hostages is an area of concern for clinical psychology.

In terms of intelligence analysis, predicting where and against whom terrorist groups may act is a priority, and so information on trends over time, predictable future trajectories and links between terrorist groups are all of importance. Finally, for those who are trying to resolve an incident during its actual time span, any information on negotiation, prediction of risk and escalation can be



helpful too. Whilst some useful work can be done with information that is within the public domain, increasingly researchers need to be able to team up with law enforcement and security agencies in order to gain access to detailed accounts. Talking to actual terrorists about what they aimed to achieve is another area where psychologists have struggled with access in the past, but has been possible in other research (e.g. Horgan, 2009, Alonso, 2006). In summary, there is still a great deal that psychological research can contribute in order to support those whose job it is to prevent or respond to hostage taking incidents.

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