Revisiting Entebbe

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It has been 40 years since *Sayeret Matkal, the S*pecial Forces unit of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) executed the rescue of hostages at Entebbe. Presently, in the times of international terrorism, the legendary operation of Entebbe is still relevant in so far as lessons out of it may be drawn at various levels—the national to the tactical. When Entebbe happened in 1976, and much beyond that, much of the world believed that terrorism was limited to a few nations, with the rest of the world as bystander. It has taken 9/11, for the international community to commonly acknowledge the threat; and one hopes that it has not got too late, already.

The historical Entebbe story is well known. An Air France airliner with 248 passengers aboard, bound for Paris from Tel Aviv, was hijacked after a stop in Athens by four terrorist operatives from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-External Operations (PFLP-EO), and the German Revolutionary Cells. The plane was flown to Uganda, where 94 Israeli hostages were separated from the other passengers (who were released) and held captive until *Sayeret Matkal,* in its legendary operation, freed the

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hostages. Lieutenant Colonel Yoni Netanyahu, the Commander of the unit that made the rescue, lost his life in the action. The Entebbe mission has, of course, since become a staple of instructions in military schools for its precision, preparation, actionable, sharp and clear intelligence, leadership, sacrifice, surprise and technical prowess, even in that age of analog technology. Entebbe has been one of those textbook military operations that will be studied until the end of time.

The Entebbe operation left four dead and one seriously injured. Nevertheless, the Israelis and the world accept the operation as a total and exemplary success, and these sacrifices were perceived as necessary for the objectives achieved. In other words, the operation reduced a near total damage scenario to fewer than 3 per cent casualties, a proportion entirely acceptable, when balanced with the huge strategic and political success. Looking back, on that 4 July 1976, there was nothing for the terrorists to fear. And even after 40 years, things have not changed much. Today, it is suicide bombers, but in the 1970s, the terror spectaculars were airliner hijackings.[1] When four terrorists—two Palestinians and two German leftists—hijacked Air France Flight 139 as it departed from Athens on 27 June 1976, they had every reason to feel the odds were in their favour. The terrorists successfully took over the Airbus A-300, which carried 246 passengers. The aircraft first landed in Libya, and then flew to Entebbe airport in Uganda. Better news awaited them in Uganda. The former President Idi Amin allowed three more terrorists to join their comrades. He also deployed his troops around the airport to protect the terrorists rather than the hostages. A planeful of passengers held hostage thousands of miles from Israel, and guarded by armed soldiers as well? What more could a terrorist ask for?

In the end, the terrorists didn't get what they asked for, which was the release of Palestinian prisoners by Israel. But they got what was due to them: a strong Israeli rescue force, flying aboard four C-130 transports, flew 2,500 miles to Entebbe. They landed on the runway, neutralised the Ugandan soldiers, killed the terrorists, rescued the hostages and blew up Idi Amin's MiG fighters so that they couldn't shoot down the unescorted C-130s.

The Entebbe operation has several tactical highpoints which comprise the hallmark of any outstanding outfit. The Sayeret Matkal team that would storm the terminal, led by Commander Lieutenant Colonel Yoni Netanyahu, included 33 commandos, sub-divided into several sub-teams. It comprised a Fire Team led by Muki Betzer and another led by Amnon Peled, which stormed the area where the hostages were kept; a team led by Yiftach Reicher Atir, which handled the customs area and the Ugandan soldiers' quarters on the second floor; a team led by Giora Zussman, which stormed the 'small hall' that was used by the terrorists and where it was feared some of the hostages were kept; a team led by Danny Arditi, which handled the terminal's VIP area; and a team led by Rami Sherman, which was responsible for vehicles and cover fire.[2] The troops to task and planning towards execution were meticulously worked out.

Prior to preparation and execution, a plethora of homework was done in terms of gauging the psyche, training standards, morale and motivation of the enemy–terrorists and Ugandan soldiers in this case. This was followed by weighing various courses that were available, leading to the choice of the best course. Initially, two main ideas were under discussion. Parachute a military force into Lake Victoria, arrive at the beach, take over the terminal in Entebbe, free the hostages, and transport them by land in vehicles with Kenya's help; or arrive at Entebbe with a large military force in eight Hercules planes, take over the airport, rescue the hostages, and fly them back to Israel. The raid plan with the Hercules planes was given a go ahead as the best course available.

Once the decision had been arrived at, all the components of power went into action on a war-footing. A case in point was disassembling the inside of the plane and putting it back together so it could carry the troops and the fuel by the Israeli Air Force. This was something that just got operational approval for usually it would have taken half a year; however, in the present case it was done in three days. Preparations, simulations and rehearsals were another much stressed on aspects. Preparations included military simulation exercises, getting on the vehicles, drilling skirmishes, getting off the vehicles, using a Mercedes (to be used as Idi Amin's car) and dressing up as Idi Amin's soldiers (Ugandans in leopard uniform and

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Kalashnikovs). And above all, the entire inventory of equipment was made available from logistics, with absolute sense of urgency.

One of the main weaknesses faced by the team led by Yoni was the lack of an ongoing and up-to-date contact with the target. The information they had on the terminal was mostly based on old plans. Knowledge of the activity at the old terminal and around it was only partial. At the eleventh hour, a detailed and updated intelligence report was obtained that was extracted from the foreign hostages who were released. This report contained information that was accurate as of Thursday morning. It was clear that the chances of getting any additional information before Saturday night—the planned H hour—were very slim. The commandos went into the operation with a three-day gap, with no chance of obtaining more up-to-date information regarding the hijackers and the activity at the terminal in Entebbe. The raiders had no choice but to hope there would be no changes, and, at the same time, expect surprises.[3]Motivation and a sense of pride on the part of soldiers' forms the bedrock of any successful military operation. Even before the decision was made on the operation's personnel, there were internal struggles amongst the Sayeret Matkal commandos. They wanted to take part in the special mission. Reservists, who heard the rumours about the operation, began making calls to Yoni and other officials in the unit, asking to be included in the force going on the operation.[4] This was a clear indicator that ownership of the ensuing operations was lapped up by one and all, irrespective of rank in the hierarchy. Also, all the troopers who participated in the raid had equal say and voice in participating and vetting the plan and it was the team leader, Yoni who provided the final stamp that the unit was ready for the operation. His confidence in its ability to get the job done was conveyed, unfiltered, to the decision-makers.

Leadership of the highest standards and orientation of hierarchy towards leadership demands was another crucial facet. While emplaned, Yoni was into the Mercedes which was the first component to slide down from the tail of the aircraft, according to the planned sequence. It was to

drive first, with Yoni leading his outfit in the front seat next to the driver. In spite of others insisting against his being in the front, so as to control the operations from a vantage location, Yoni demonstrated steadfastness towards leading by example. Later, when Yoni was hurt, the second in command declared on the radio to all the sub-teams that Yoni was hurt and that he was taking over the command, to which all conformed. This clearly exhibited the high standards of leadership and preparedness of subordinate leaders to take charge in the face of an exigency–a benchmark that any outfit should aspire for.

Operation Yonatan in the First Person, has accounts by the commandos from Sayeret Matkal. They have each written their own version of events. The book is almost a complete account as to how an operation in such a far-away and hostile place, which would normally require months and, at times, years of planning, took shape in only 48 hours and was a success. The answers to these questions, as the testimonies in the book indicate, were a combination of several factors and reasons.[5]

First was the most crucial: the human factor. There is no doubt that many things could have gone wrong, leading the operation to end in disaster. On the other hand, the fact was that the Sayeret Matkal, with its high standards, reduced the margin of error to a minimum. Second, it was the element of surprise that worked in favour of the raiders. Israel was surprised by the hijackers' ability to hijack a plane and fly it somewhere as far as Uganda. But surprise also worked in the opposite direction. Because of the great distance from Israel, it appeared that the hijackers and Ugandan soldiers didn't imagine Israel would even consider a rescue operation. In other operations, inside Israel, when the Sayeret was operating under much more favourable conditions, it sometimes had failed. Not to forget, in 1976', the aspect of information transparency as compared to the present era did not prevail.

The third crucial facet concerned intelligence. The commandos had left Israel for the operation with two to three days old information and had no way of knowing if anything had changed in the interim. Gathering of information ahead of the operation was executed with ingenuity and resourcefulness—from collection of maps and data from Israelis who had

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worked in Uganda in earlier years, to sending a Mossad undercover operative and a pilot, for photographing the terminal from the air.

The ultimate game-changer was the role played by the military's high command and the political leadership. They were the ones who bore the responsibility, each in his own field, and they were the ones who would have carried the burden of failure on their shoulders had the operation not gone according to plan. Unlike indecisiveness on the part of nations to act boldly in such situations, at Entebbe, the military and not the domestic crisis team (dominated by foreign policy experts) handled the problem right from the beginning. With the IDF Chief sitting in the Cabinet, the do-ability of such a mission was an option available to the decision-makers. The distance of military commanders from key decision-making bodies and their replacement by civilian foreign policy experts and civilian negotiators, generally leads to dilemma and indecisiveness.

In addition to this, a few more important lessons may be learnt from Entebbe. The first is that that the soldier is just as important as technology, something that the today's modern armies would do well to remember. The man behind the machine cannot be substituted—he can only be complemented by technology. Entebbe was a remarkably low-tech operation. Most crucially, the human element of combat–leadership, emotional belongingness (to the team and to the cause), motivation, and pride in professional achievements–to name a few, reigned supreme.

The biggest lesson addresses India's perception of terrorism. Terrorism is all about creating fear or more accurately, helplessness. The message of the terrorists is that they can strike us at their will and that, there is nothing that we can do about it. Therefore, we must submit to their demands. Entebbe has been immortalised not just for its military brilliance, but also because it symbolised something more basic. It reassured that, vis-à-vis, non-state actors, the state actors are not powerless. Not that counter-terror commando raids are the total solution: America, Israel, Britain, France, and even India have killed plenty of insurgents and terrorists, and still the (Terrorists' Initiated Strikes (TIIs)) go on. And as today's world reels under

terror massacres in Paris, Orlando, Istanbul, Peshawar and Mumbai, it is too easy to feel helpless, too easy to succumb to the despair that terrorism is a fact of life, to be accepted like the weather. It is precisely what Entebbe symbolises against.

Nations have fought terror and insurgencies, mostly by themselves. Although not on a scale like that in the case of Israel, India too was left alone to combat the challenge. Unanimity to combat terror amongst the global powers that matter, is still a pipe-dream. Today, terror knows no borders and does not differentiate amongst countries or peoples. To its victims, it is just a matter of being lucky—or unlucky—of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Islamic State in Iraq and Libya (ISIS/ISIL), Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) and any number of other groups compete to carry out one outrageous act after another. The internet and satellite TV have brought terror into our living rooms and it has now reached the point where we are accustomed to much of it.[6]

In the midst of the global threat posed by terror of various hues, there is no shortage of opinions on how to defeat it. Defeat it, we must, but where is the international unity necessary to achieve that objective? A biased and prejudiced perception of terror groups by the nation states lies at the root of the challenge. As terror becomes a state policy for some, over a period of time, the terror outfits have acquired a self-proclaimed sense of invincibility about themselves. Operations like Entebbe, prove it otherwise and shall never get out of context in spite of belonging to a different period, 40 years ago.

Notes

1. Michael Peck, 'When Gutsy Israeli Commandos Terrorized the Terrorists', 3 July 2016, available at nationalinterest.org.in, accessed on
2. Bergman Ronen, In The Face of All The Risks, 27 June 2016 available at http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4818047,00.html, accessed on 04 December 2016
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Daniel S Mariaschin, 'Entebbe: Are We Heeding the Lessons?', 30 June 2016.