

Firing on the Fourth

In Los Angeles, a man kills two people at an El Al ticket counter. It's monstrous. But is it terrorism?

By RICHARD LACAYO

ONE THING MELISSA KNIELING noticed was the man's shirt. Even in the packed Los Angeles International Airport, where she was collecting donations for a women's shelter, the bright pink shirt stood out. But not him. Sometime around 11:30 a.m., when she glanced over at the El Al ticket counter, the man in the pink shirt caught her eye and held it. "He didn't seem angry," the 18-year-old says now with a shiver. "Then he nonchalantly pulled out his gun and started shooting."

There is little doubt that Hesham Mohamed Ali Hedayet, a 41-year-old Egyptian limo driver who has lived in the U.S. for 10 years, went to the Los Angeles airport last week with the intent to kill. Especially this year, when terrorist fireworks for the Fourth of July were being imagined in every crowded place, no ordinary traveler would show up at any U.S. airport carrying two handguns, a 6-in. hunting knife and a supply of fresh ammunition. Hedayet's attack left two dead and at least three wounded before he was gunned down.

It was terrifying, but was it terrorism? Was it politically motivated? Part of a well-planned conspiracy? Or was it the action of one angry man acting alone? First Hedayet killed Victoria Hen, 25, who was working at the ticket counter. Then he spun around and shot to death Jacob Aminov, a 46-year-old diamond importer and father of eight who was standing nearby, seeing off friends. This kind of attack—gunfire into an airport crowd—is one of the terror scenarios that El Al security guards train for most frequently. Almost at once, one of them tackled Hedayet with the help of a bystander and began struggling with him. As the terminal rang with the screams of stunned passengers and the noise of perhaps a dozen shots, a senior guard rushed

in and shot Hedayet several times. According to FBI spokesman Matt McLaughlin, even after being shot Hedayet continued to fire and stab at his subduers. In the struggle, both guards were wounded, as was a woman bystander who was shot in the ankle.

To the Israelis, who have experienced other airport attacks, Hedayet's assault looked pretty plainly like an act of terror-

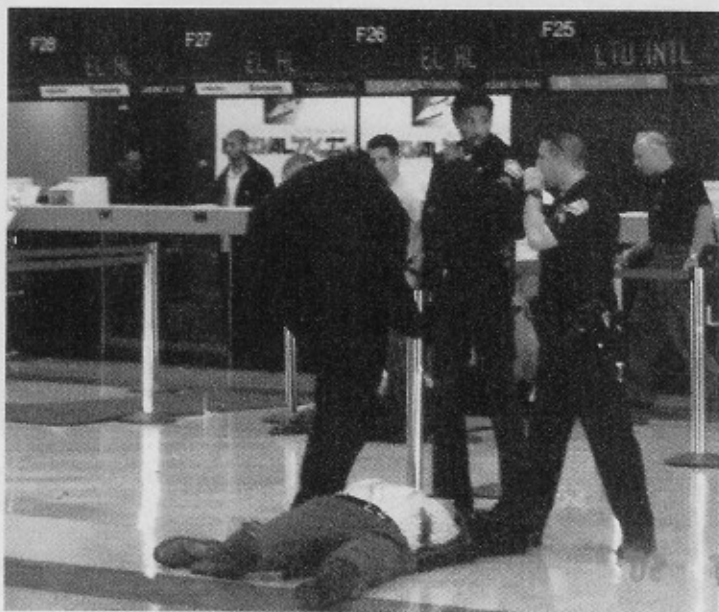


PHOTO: AP/WIDEWORLD

WHY? Egyptian limo driver Hedayet, right, had no known links to terrorists. He was shot dead, top, by a security official

ism. "It was conducted in a way that reminds us of many previous attacks," says Yuval Rotem, Israel's consul general in Los Angeles. The FBI has been more cautious about categorizing the episode. Hedayet was not on any law-enforcement watch lists. At this early stage of the investigation, FBI officials speculate that he may have been depressed about personal problems. They want to know more about why police



AP—CALIF. DEPT. OF MOTOR VEHICLES

were once called to his apartment complex in Irvine, Calif., 44 miles south of the airport, to handle a domestic dispute involving him and his wife, who recently returned to Egypt with their two sons. After the airport attack, she was questioned by Egyptian authorities. The Fourth of July was also a significant day for Hedayet—his birthday, according to the date of birth on his driver's license.

Neighbors in Irvine describe Hedayet as a quiet man who was married to an outgoing and friendly woman. "I saw about 80% more of her than I did of him," says Dan Danielewicz. "He seemed friendly, but maybe a little awkward because he wasn't as proficient at the language or not as acclimatized as the wife and kids." But

Hedayet had also recently complained to the management of his apartment complex about his upstairs neighbor. After Sept. 11 the neighbor had hung a U.S. flag and a Marine Corps flag from the balcony of his apartment, above Hedayet's doorway. Other residents say Hedayet took it as a gesture aimed at him as a Muslim.

The shoot-out closed parts of the L.A. airport for more than four hours, leaving more than 6,000 passengers temporarily stranded. It came just three days after Los Angeles Mayor James K. Hahn unveiled a long-awaited airport-redesign plan containing \$9.6 billion in changes proposed partly as terrorism safeguards. But the focus of security in the new design was to keep terrorists and explosives off planes. Passengers would check in at an off-site center far from their gates, then take a light railway to the terminal while their baggage was inspected in a new underground screening and handling system. But they would not go through a security check before entering the off-site terminal. Gunmen could just walk through the doors there and launch gunfire and explosives into helpless crowds. The shooting last week has convinced Hahn that the plan needs to be rethought. "We're certainly going to learn from this," he says. There's still a great deal to be learned. —Reported by Sally Donnelly/Washington, Aharon Klein/Jerusalem, Jeanne McDowell and Sean Scully/Los Angeles and Amany Radwan/Cairo

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