

Netanyahu Embraces FlyDubai Passengers

Israeli prime minister seen to be benefiting from a wave of hopeful nationalism

By FELIZ SOLOMON

TEL AVIV—As FlyDubai passengers returned to Israel after their narrow escape from an attack officials now say was terrorism, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was there to greet them.

Netanyahu shared a video of himself embracing a blood-stained Israeli who he said had helped save the plane. On Thursday, the prime minister met again with several passengers who intervened to regain control after the co-pilot attacked the captain and tried to crash Flight 1073 from Dubai.

The FlyDubai attack fits into Netanyahu's campaign pitch that Israel is under attack from all sides and only his right-wing coalition can protect it. He is also benefiting from a wave of optimistic nationalism set off by the passengers who rushed the cockpit and seized back control.

After three years of being under fire for the death toll in Gaza and criticism of Israel's incursions into Lebanon and Syria, Israel celebrated a rescue that echoed their self image



Left, Israeli passengers returned Wednesday. Above, Netanyahu with one of the passengers who helped thwart the attack.

as a people primed to take action.

Jubilant crowds gathered outside the airport to catch a glimpse of the passengers when they landed, singing and dancing while draped in Israeli flags. Television news shows filled up with laudatory analysis and interviews.

"This is a great Israeli success story, it has all the characteristics of what Israelis like to think about themselves: people that don't just stand by and wait for someone to take the initiative," said Yaakov

Katz, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, a think tank in Jerusalem. "It's playing out in a kind of celebratory way—look at what we can do, look at who we are—that's the sense you're getting from his supporters."

The prime minister, however, will also have to reckon with growing questions about how the attacker—Omani co-pilot Hamam al-Hammami, people familiar with the matter said—slipped through security to work such a sensitive route.

FlyDubai hired Hammami

after Oman banned him from flying on its state-owned airline when the country picked up signs he had adopted radical ideological views, people familiar with the matter said. In Israel, there's an increasing perception that a serious security failure has taken place.

FlyDubai said it wouldn't comment while the investigation is continuing. A spokesman for Netanyahu's office said Israel would rely on its own analysis and would be involved on the ground in the investigation in the coming days.

Netanyahu faces a tight election contest at the end of this month after more than 19 years off and on in power, following a tumultuous term in which the nation experienced the worst attack in its history on Oct. 7, 2023, and plunged into three years of war on multiple fronts.

With the vote weeks away, Netanyahu's right-leaning Likud party is polling almost equally to its main challenger, the centrist opposition Yashar party led by former military chief Gadi Eisenkot. The two

sides are locked in a fight for any advantage that will determine who will get to form Israel's next government. The latest polls point to a close race. If neither side can cross that threshold, Netanyahu could remain in power as caretaker prime minister.

He says he represents the best protector of Israel in a dangerous Middle East.

While Netanyahu has tried to keep the spotlight on Flight 1073, his opponents quickly shifted to other issues. Eisenkot focused his initial response on the heroism of the passengers, rather than Netanyahu's response. Another key opposition figure, Avigdor Liberman, criticized what he said was a disgraceful attempt by Netanyahu's camp to use the episode for political gain. The prime minister's office didn't respond to a request for comment over the criticism.

Several of the passengers themselves declined to talk about politics in interviews. "I'm just thankful to be alive," said Mika Bauman, a 25-year-old Israeli-American. "The bravery of everyone on that plane honestly just showed how in moments like that, life is the top priority, which was really beautiful to see."

Analysts say it is hard to predict whether the incident might move the needle politically.

FlyDubai Pilot Had Red Flags

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matter said. Emirati authorities are currently investigating FlyDubai staff who were involved in the hiring process, people familiar with the investigation said. FlyDubai said it wouldn't comment while the investigation was ongoing.

The last chance to stop him before the airport came in Israel. It was a low bar—pilots from countries like Oman that don't have diplomatic relations are barred from flying to the country, so Hammami should have been stopped outright.

Israel requires foreign carriers to submit lists of inbound passengers and crew in advance. FlyDubai sent the manifest for Flight 1073, said Israel's Tax Authority, which maintains the country's database of flier information. But the Ministry of Transportation, which oversees foreign carriers, said it didn't believe it had the authority or required expertise to vet flight crews.

The ministry has never asked for a passenger or crew list since the database was set up in 2023. It says it didn't know it could. Instead, the ministry says FlyDubai agreed in writing to check its pilots' backgrounds and nationalities.

A classified 2024 report flagged the ministry for failing to adequately secure foreign carriers' flights.

Obvious threats

With the string of missed opportunities, the dramatic fight for survival by the wounded captain and a handful of passengers is now being overshadowed by a growing realization there was a massive security failure on several fronts.

Security experts said the failure is remarkable given the surveillance and intelligence capabilities of the U.A.E. and Israel, and the obvious threats to the route the co-pilot was allowed to fly.

It also points to a conundrum of aviation security. Regulators buffeted by major failures like the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S. and the intentional crash by the co-pilot of Germanwings Flight 9525 in 2015 are caught in a tug of war—protecting against dangerous passengers by securing the cockpit or guarding against rogue pilots by making it easier to intervene.

Security experts say the onus has to be on intelligence services to identify and stop threats before they ever get to the airport.

"If this was a dedicated jihadist terror attack, there are multiple levels of failure that



A replacement FlyDubai plane with passengers from flight 1073, above. Below, Smit Machchhar (left) and Hamam al-Hammami.

happened from an intelligence perspective way before we get to the fact that someone may have missed something in security screening," said Matthew Borie, chief intelligence officer and co-founder of Osprey Flight Solutions.

Officials in the U.A.E., Oman and Israel all privately said there were significant failures across the board—from the U.A.E. and Israel's vetting to Oman's communication of its concerns about Hammami.

The U.A.E. declined to comment while the investigation into the incident and its causes is ongoing. A spokeswoman for the Omani government didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday said he'd ordered a review of the security of foreign airline flights to the country.

The security missteps culminated in a dramatic series of events a little over halfway into Flight 1073's trip to Tel Aviv last week.

The airplane's captain, Smit Machchhar, said his co-pilot excused himself to pray, then struck him several times with an onboard emergency ax.

The pilot managed to open the cockpit door, letting in a group of rescuers who subdued the co-pilot and pulled the plane out of a dangerous dive.

The U.A.E.'s attorney general said on Saturday that the co-pilot had tried to commit an act of terrorism. Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Israel all suspect he was trying to crash the plane in Tel Aviv, people familiar with their thinking said.

All three are investigating whether he acted alone. They haven't turned up any links to any foreign power or major terrorist organization, they said.

Hammami is 29 years old, born to an Omani father and Syrian mother, The Wall Street



Journal previously reported. He lives in Dubai but traveled frequently as a teenager to Syria during that country's long civil war. Investigators are looking into the possibility he began to radicalize in the war-torn country where Islam



to get a job with flag carrier Royal Air Maroc. He underwent three months of training with the company, but ultimately wasn't hired, Moroccan state media said, citing the company.

This February, he joined FlyDubai, a budget carrier owned by the city's flagship Emirates Airline aggressively hiring pilots to feed its growth.

The airline launched in 2009 and has been expanding its fleet to 140 airports in cities like Sarajevo, Damascus and Tashkent, often moving workers from South and Southeast Asia to more lucrative markets in Central Europe and the Middle East. Last year, it posted passenger growth of 17% in the Middle East.

Global demand for pilots is running high. There were 382,000 commercial pilots around the world in 2025, according to aviation training technology company CAE. The industry will need to hire another 267,000 by the middle of the next decade, it said.

To help meet its needs, FlyDubai set up a program last year to train pilots from scratch and operates its own

flight-training center.

People familiar with the events said Oman also mishandled the situation. International aviation licensing is largely on a country-by-country basis. But if Oman had formally pulled Hammami's license over its concerns, it likely would have been flagged to the U.A.E., people familiar with the matter said.

Concerns about extremism should have been flagged around the Gulf as well, the people said.

Israel should have been aware of Hammami's presence in the cockpit.

Foreign airlines submit lists of passengers and crew to Israel ahead of time. A 2023 law set up the database of those lists managed by Israel's Tax Authority with the primary goal of preventing terrorism.

Under Israel's division of labor, the Shin Bet internal security service oversees the country's airlines. It falls to the Transportation Ministry to oversee the pilots and crew on foreign carriers' flights to make sure they come from friendly countries, said Eytan Ben David, former director of the counterterrorism bureau in the Israeli prime minister's office and former deputy head of the aviation security division in El Al, Israel's flagship airline.

Ben David said that around a decade ago he was alerted by the Transportation Ministry that Turkish Airlines intended to place an Iranian pilot on a flight to Tel Aviv based on a staff list the airline had sent.

"We stopped it immediately," Ben David said. The database makes that work easier.

The legislation says authorized bodies like the Ministry of Transportation and other security agencies including the Shin Bet and Mossad can ask to review lists to vet people on

flights.

The ministry said it was never told the database was operational or could be accessed. A person familiar with the database said the ministry has never asked.

On the question of stopping onboard threats, the ministry said it is responsible for the security of incoming flights but isn't itself responsible for vetting flight crews and lacks the intelligence capabilities to do so. It relies on foreign carriers to make those checks in line with its requirements.

"The Security Division at the Ministry of Transport has been responsible for security arrangements for incoming foreign aviation to Israel since 1977," it said. "Framework-wise, the Ministry verifies with the countries from which flights depart that the airlines' pilots undergo background security checks in accordance with international regulation."

The ministry said it required FlyDubai to assign pilots from countries with diplomatic relations with Israel and conduct background checks, and didn't itself check or approve Hammami.

A classified May 2024 report by Israel's comptroller general warned Israel's aviation security had grown lax and identified major issues in the way foreign airlines entering Israeli airspace were secured. Responsibility for security in Israel was fragmented, and the lines of responsibility weren't always clear, it found.

It found that officials in the Ministry of Transportation were failing in their oversight in part due to manpower and budget issues, a person familiar with the report said.

Israeli airlines got closer scrutiny, the person said.

The divergent treatment was evident this year. In February, security officials stopped Israel's own airlines from flying between Dubai and Tel Aviv for several months amid the risks posed by the war against Iran and long-held concerns about gaps in the Dubai airport's security for flights to the country.

FlyDubai, however, continued to work the route. It has become a crucial connection between Israel and the rest of the world, maintaining service almost continuously throughout the past three years of war that began in Gaza and spread to Lebanon and Iran.

Israel should have caught the Omani pilot based solely on his nationality, Ben David said. Pilots who should have been excluded by their nationalities have been flying to Israel more frequently, a sign enforcement had grown sloppy, people familiar with the matter said.

Ben David said Flight 1073 almost ended in disaster due to negligence. "It seems that the names weren't properly checked and there wasn't proper vetting. This is how we got here," he said. "We need to treat this incident as if a disaster happened."