Episode Book

EPISODE #5644

Scrambled Jets and the Hijack Code: What Really Happens

PUBLISHED	30 September 2026 at 09:51 UTC
DURATION	23:32
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/hijack-code-scrambled-jets/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:38 UTC

SYNOPSIS

When Flydubai FZ1073 squawked a hijacking code over Saudi airspace, Israel scrambled fighter jets to intercept a foreign airliner that had never entered its territory. What does "scrambled to escort" actually mean? This episode walks through the real interception ladder — from wing-rocking and cannon warnings to forced diversion and politically authorized shoot-down — and why the fighters are there to stop a plane from reaching a building, not to rescue the people inside. Then it gets harder: whose airspace, whose law, and whose offense is it when a UAE-registered jet full of Israelis has an emergency over Saudi Arabia? We unpack the Tokyo Convention, Chicago Convention Article 3bis, and the uncomfortable gaps in international law that leave the nightmare scenario unregulated. Finally, we ask whether flying El Al actually changes anything — especially when the threat is inside the cockpit.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A passenger jet bound for Tel Aviv squawks a hijacking code over Saudi airspace, and Israel scrambles fighter jets. That's the headline. What it actually means is where this gets interesting.



Herman

And what "scrambled to escort" means in practice is not what most people picture.



Corn

Right. Hannah sent us something this week. She's been following the Flydubai FZ1073 story, and her question isn't really about what happened in that cockpit. It's about what happens next. The plane sends a distress signal, then a hijacking signal, Israel launches fighters. What does that actually mean? What options does an IAF pilot have when he pulls up alongside a 737 full of people? Is the nightmare scenario shooting it down, or are there other ways? Can you force a plane down, redirect it, escort it somewhere? What are these pilots actually trained for?



Herman

And then the second half of it.



Corn

And then the second half. The plane was over Saudi airspace. It's not an Israeli airline. It wasn't in Israeli airspace yet. So how does Israel get involved at all? What if it had turned toward Iran instead, who has jurisdiction then, and how would any of that cooperation actually work? And finally, the thing everyone thinks when they read this story. Maybe we should just fly El Al. Does El Al actually do anything different, especially against a crew member?



Herman

That last one is the one that doesn't have a clean answer.



Corn

Let's start with what we actually know. And how little that is.



Herman

So FZ1073, Boeing 737 MAX, Dubai to Tel Aviv. Departs around seven in the morning, scheduled into Ben Gurion about half nine. Roughly a hundred and eighty people on board, dozens of Israelis. About ninety minutes in, over Jordanian airspace, it squawks 7700. General emergency. Then, briefly, 7500. Unlawful interference. Hijacking.



Corn

Briefly being the operative word.



Herman

Briefly. It goes back to 7700 before it lands. And the flight data is strange. The aircraft nosedives from about thirty-four thousand feet to seventeen thousand in under a minute. Accelerates from four hundred and eleven knots to nearly six hundred. Recovers a little, then drops again below fourteen thousand. And then for the next hour it's hand-flown at about fifteen thousand feet. Not on autopilot. Hand-flown.



Corn

A 737 MAX hand-flown at fifteen thousand feet for an hour is not a normal diversion.



Herman

No. Then it lands at Tabuk, in northwestern Saudi Arabia. Which is a civilian airport and a military base, in a country with no formal diplomatic relations with Israel. So Flydubai has to send a replacement aircraft just to get the passengers onward to Tel Aviv.



Corn

And the official line. This is the part.



Herman

The Prime Minister's Office says it was not believed to be a hijacking. Defense officials say it was an altercation between the two pilots. And then an Israeli official tells the Jerusalem Post it's unclear whether the pilot meant to hijack, to crash, or to carry out a quote unquote nine-eleven-style attack. And that the pilot sought to hijack the aircraft.



Corn

So it wasn't a hijacking, and the pilot sought to hijack the aircraft.



Herman

Both of those are on the record, same day.



Corn

That contradiction isn't a gotcha. It tells you the investigation is live and nobody has the cockpit voice recorder yet. But it does mean we should hold the details loosely.



Herman

Agreed. So that's the incident as we know it. Now let's talk about what those scrambled jets were actually doing up there.



Herman

It's doing almost all the work. There's a quote from a senior IAF officer, given anonymously back in 2007, that lays out the actual ladder. He says, we buzz the suspect plane, and if that doesn't work, we can fire our cannons very close to its cockpit. The idea is to do everything possible to unnerve the hijackers. And then he says, but as a last resort, we have shoot-down orders. There is no way we can allow another World Trade Center disaster to take place in Tel Aviv.



Corn

Unnerve the hijackers. That's the phrase.



Herman

And what that looks like physically, from the cockpit of the airliner, is a fighter pulling in close off the wing, rocking its wings, maybe crossing in front of the nose. Then, if that doesn't get a response, cannon fire into the air near the cockpit. Tracer rounds you can see. It's a visual language. It says, we are here, we are armed, and the next step is you.



Corn

And the next step is not necessarily destruction. He also says they're under instructions to force suspect planes down, at a location away from built-up areas.



Herman

Right. Force-down is a real option. You shadow a plane and you shepherd it. You put yourself on its wing and you give it nowhere to go but the heading you want. You're using the threat of your presence to steer a two-hundred-ton aircraft. It's coercion, not destruction, at that rung of the ladder.



Corn

So walk the ladder for me. Rung one.



Herman

Buzz. Get their attention. Rung two, cannon warning, close enough to the cockpit that the crew can see it. Rung three, redirect or force-down. Steer them to a field away from population. Rung four, shoot-down. And that last rung has to be authorized at the political level, not by the pilot.



Corn

The pilot in the fighter doesn't decide that.



Herman

The pilot in the fighter absolutely does not decide that. And we have a case that shows how far up it goes. April 2007, IAF jets intercepted a Continental airliner that had lost radio contact. They guided it back out over the Mediterranean until communications came back, then cleared it to land. And an IAF officer afterward said those pilots came the closest they ever had to shooting down a civilian airliner. The Prime Minister and the Defense Minister were being kept informed in real time, in case a shoot-down decision became necessary.



Corn

So the decision to kill two hundred people on a civilian jet is not made in a cockpit. It's made in a room, by politicians, while the pilot holds position.



Herman

And that's the whole point of the ladder. Every rung below the last one exists to buy time and to make the decision unnecessary. The fighter pilot's job is to be terrifying enough that nobody has to make the call.



Corn

But here's what I want to push on. If the ladder is that structured, what does it actually feel like from inside the airliner? You're a passenger, you look out the window, and there's an F-16 off the wing. What are you supposed to think?



Herman

From the passenger seat, you probably don't know it's happening at all. The whole point of the buzz is that it's aimed at the cockpit, not the cabin. The fighter comes in on the side the flight crew can see, it rocks its wings, it's trying to communicate with two people up front. Most passengers are watching a movie or asleep. The terrifying part is that the passengers have no idea how close the situation came to the last rung.



Corn

Which is arguably the right design. You don't want two hundred people panicking.



Herman

You don't. And the pilots know that. The fighter pilot knows the airliner crew can see him. The airliner crew knows the passengers can't. So there's this whole silent negotiation happening at thirty thousand feet that the people in the back are completely outside of.



Corn

Why is Israel like this? Why the buzz-and-warn apparatus specifically?



Herman

Because of 1973. Israeli warplanes shot down a Libyan airliner that had strayed into Israeli-controlled Sinai by accident. Scores of people died. It was a mistake, and it was catastrophic, and Israel's entire counter-hijacking architecture is explicitly a response to it. The buzz, the cannon warning, the Code Positive system, all of it exists because of that one shoot-down.



Corn

Code Positive is worth explaining properly, because it's the piece most people have never heard of.



Herman

As of 2008, every airline flying into Israel has to equip its pilots with a personalized card carrying a predetermined code. On approach, the pilot relays that code to ground controllers. If hijackers kill the crew, the code doesn't come, and that silence flags a problem. And if a pilot is forced to transmit under duress, they can enter false data as a discreet mayday. The Transportation Ministry's chief security officer at the time, Danny Shenar, put it as, you can't bluff this system.



Corn

So the system assumes the crew is honest, and it detects the moment they stop being in control.



Herman

That's exactly what it detects. Not intent. Control.



Corn

Which brings us to the framing problem. Every headline said the jets were scrambled to escort the plane. But the officer's own words make the primary contingency destruction, not protection.



Herman

There was a comment on one of the Israeli papers that put it about as bluntly as it can be put. By being a passenger in a plane, the IAF intervention is there to shoot you down, not to protect you.



Corn

That's a hard sentence.



Herman

It's a hard sentence and it's true to the doctrine. The fighters are not there to save you. They're there to make sure the aircraft doesn't reach a building. Those are different missions and they only overlap when everything goes right.



Corn

And this is not exotic. This happens regularly.



Herman

Constantly. 2006, two IAF jets scrambled to escort an El Al plane from Moscow that was wrongly thought hijacked. Contact had been lost for three minutes. 2009, jets scrambled to escort a Delta flight out of New York after the pilot accidentally activated a hijacking alert. An Ethiopian airliner that failed to identify itself got escorted into Ben Gurion. This is a routine procedure that occasionally makes the news.



Corn

So when Hannah asks what the fighters' realistic options are, the answer is a ladder with four rungs, and the top rung is authorized by politicians, and the bottom three exist to make the top rung unnecessary.



Herman

And the most likely outcome by far is that the plane lands somewhere and everyone gets off.



Corn

That's the mechanics of the interception. But there's a whole other layer here. Whose airspace, whose law, and whose airline.



Herman

The jurisdiction puzzle is the harder half of this. FZ1073 is a UAE-registered airline. It's over Saudi and Jordanian airspace. It hasn't entered Israeli airspace. It's not an Israeli carrier. And Israel scrambles jets.



Corn

So how does that work?



Herman

The mechanism is that Israel treats any aircraft bound for Israel, and any suspected threat vector pointed at Israeli territory, as within its security interest. It doesn't wait for the plane to cross the border. And Code Positive plus intelligence-sharing with allies gives it advance warning. So it can be in the air before the aircraft is anywhere near Ben Gurion.



Corn

And the legal basis for intervening on a foreign aircraft?



Herman

The Tokyo Convention, 1965. The state of registry has jurisdiction over offenses committed on board. That's also the legal basis that lets foreign air marshals operate outside their own airspace. Apply it here. On FZ1073, the registry state is the UAE. So the UAE is the state that owns the offense.



Corn

Which is a strange thing to say about a fight in a cockpit over Saudi Arabia on a plane full of Israelis.



Herman

It's a strange sentence and it's the actual structure. The UAE owns the offense. Saudi Arabia owns the airspace. Israel owns the interest, because the plane is coming to it. Three states, three different kinds of claim, and none of them is a hijacking statute.



Corn

And the international law on shooting down a civilian airliner. What's actually written down?



Herman

This is where I have to be honest. The anchor is Chicago Convention Article 3bis, added in 1984 after the KAL 007 shoot-down. It obliges states to refrain from resorting to weapons against civil aircraft in flight, and in interception, not to endanger lives. But it stops short of an absolute ban. It's not a flat prohibition. And I could not pull a dedicated legal source on how that standard applies to a hijacked airliner that a state believes is about to be used as a weapon. So I'm going to flag that as not fully nailed down rather than pretend I know.



Corn

Say the honest version.



Herman

The honest version is that the law says be restrained, and the doctrine says have shoot-down orders ready, and the gap between those two things is where every one of these decisions actually gets made. There isn't a clean legal answer that resolves it.



Corn

Now the Iran question, because I think this is the one that's unanswered.



Herman

It's unanswered. I found nothing describing a hijacked Tel Aviv-bound aircraft turning toward Iran, or Israel and Iran cooperating on an interception, or who would have jurisdiction in that specific case. And that silence is itself informative. The closest anchors are still the Tokyo Convention for registry-state jurisdiction and Article 3bis for restraint on weapons. Neither one tells you what happens when the plane is heading for a country that is not going to hand it back.



Corn

So the answer to Hannah's question is, we don't know, and neither does anyone who's written about it.



Herman

That's the answer. There's no published doctrine for it because the scenario is a nightmare with no good outcome. If a hijacked Israeli-bound plane turns toward Iran, you have an aircraft you can't reach, a state you can't coordinate with, and a registry state on the other side of the Gulf. Every option is bad.



Corn

Let me make sure I understand the shape of it. The plane is in Saudi airspace, heading for Israel, and then it banks east toward Iran. Who's chasing it?



Herman

In theory, everybody with a radar in the region. In practice, nobody with a clean legal mandate. The Saudis own the airspace it's in. The Emiratis own the offense. The Israelis own the destination it's no longer going to. And the Iranians own the airspace it's about to enter, and they are not going to cooperate with an Israeli interception over their own territory.



Corn

So the Israeli jets would have to break off.



Herman

They'd have to break off at the border, or they'd be flying armed fighters into Iranian airspace, which is a completely different incident. And Iran has no incentive to help. So the plane just goes.



Corn

And the passengers?



Herman

The passengers are now a diplomatic problem between four countries that mostly don't talk to each other. That's the nightmare. The shoot-down is at least a decision. This is the absence of any decision being possible.



Corn

The Saudi dimension is more concrete. The plane landed at Tabuk.



Herman

Tabuk is a civilian airport and a military base, in a country with no formal diplomatic relations with Israel. So the Israelis on that plane are sitting in a country that doesn't recognize the country they're flying to. Repatriation becomes third-party logistics. Flydubai sends a replacement aircraft. Nobody's hostage, but nobody's in a normal situation either.



Corn

The interception itself happened over Saudi and Jordanian airspace. So whose air defense authority applies?



Herman

Practically, everyone's, in sequence. Jordan and Saudi have their own radars and their own fighters. Israel has its own interest. In a real emergency, all of those systems are talking, or trying to, and the plane in the middle is being watched by three countries that don't share a common command structure.



Corn

Even the coordination is improvised.



Herman

Even the coordination is improvised. There's no standing multinational command for a hijacked airliner over the Levant. There's a set of bilateral relationships and a phone call, and the phone call is happening while the plane is in the air.



Corn

Now the part everyone actually wants. El Al.



Herman

El Al is different, and it's not marketing. Start with air marshals. El Al puts armed marshals on every flight. Not random, not intelligence-led like most programs in the world. Every flight. They're former combat soldiers from elite units, in plain clothes, sitting among the passengers. Only the crew knows who they are. And they sit near mirrors, so they can watch behind them.



Corn

That last detail is the one that tells you it's real.



Herman

It tells you they've thought about the problem from the seat, not from a policy document. Then the cockpit. El Al aircraft have double doors requiring a code. The second door only opens after the first one closes and the person has been identified by the captain or the first officer. Reinforced steel floors separate the passenger cabin from the baggage hold. And most El Al pilots are former Israeli Air Force pilots.



Corn

The government pays for a lot of it.



Herman

In April 2013, Israel increased its subsidy to cover ninety-seven and a half percent of El Al's security costs, ahead of the Open Skies agreement with the EU. That's not a company choosing to spend on security. That's a state treating an airline as part of its border.



Corn

Does the model have a real-world test?



Herman

November 2002. El Al Flight 581, Tel Aviv to Istanbul. A passenger armed with a pocketknife tries to storm the cockpit. Two El Al security guards overpower him. The cockpit door is locked, he kicks it, it doesn't budge. The flight sends a hijacking signal on approach to Istanbul and lands safely. Every layer of the model worked, in order.



Corn

The answer to "should we just fly El Al" is yes, mostly.



Herman

Mostly. And here's where I want to be careful, because this is the part that cuts against the instinct. El Al's double cockpit doors and Code Positive are designed for a hijacker in the cabin. Someone who has to get through a door. A rogue pilot defeats both, because the pilot has the codes and the pilot is already inside the door.



Corn

The FZ1073 scenario, if it was a rogue crew member, is the one case El Al doesn't fully solve.



Herman

It's the hardest case. The whole architecture assumes the threat is on the passenger side of the cockpit door. Move the threat inside the cockpit and you're relying on the other pilot, on the marshal, on Code Positive noticing that the code coming from the cockpit is wrong. Which it might. But it's a thinner margin than the rest of the model.



Corn

If the marshal is in the cabin and the fight is in the cockpit, what does the marshal actually do?



Herman

That's the uncomfortable part. The marshal can't get in. The door is designed to keep people out, and that includes the marshal. So the marshal's job in that scenario is to hold the cabin, keep passengers calm, and be ready if the cockpit door opens. The fight inside the cockpit is between the two pilots, and the marshal is on the wrong side of a locked door.



Corn

The security model has a blind spot exactly where the threat is.



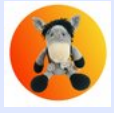
Herman

It has a blind spot exactly where the threat is. And that's not a criticism of El Al. It's a structural fact about putting a hardened door between the cabin and the cockpit. The door protects against one threat and isolates the crew from help against another.



Corn

So "just fly El Al" is a real improvement and not a solution.



Herman

That's the honest version. It's the best security model in commercial aviation and it has a hole, and the hole is exactly the shape of this incident.



Corn

Before we wrap, Hilbert's been sitting on something about this one.



Hilbert

The 7500 is the part I'd look at.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

I spent a few years around people who worked the interception side. Watching. And the thing they'd tell you is that 7500 is not a switch a pilot flips casually. You don't bump it. It's a deliberate four-digit entry, and it's the one code that guarantees fighters in the air and a shoot-down decision moving up the chain. Nobody squawks 7500 by accident and leaves it there.



Herman

It didn't stay there.



Hilbert

It didn't stay there. It went 7700, then 7500, then back to 7700. That sequence is the interesting part. If a pilot decides to hijack the plane, he squawks 7500 and it stays. He's announcing it. If a pilot is fighting someone for the transponder, you get exactly what we got. A moment of 7500 and then it's gone, because the other guy got it back. Or the guy who set it lost the fight for the panel.



Corn

The code sequence is itself evidence.



Hilbert

It's evidence that two people were fighting over that panel. It doesn't tell you which one was the problem. But it tells you the cockpit was contested, and it tells you roughly when. The official line is a fight between the pilots. The code sequence fits that. It just doesn't tell you who started it.



Herman

Which is a much more precise way of saying what the Jerusalem Post official was saying.



Hilbert

They're saying they don't know. I'm saying the transponder already told us something. Whoever was in that cockpit was fighting over the controls, not just over the argument.



Corn

The fact that it went back to 7700 rather than staying at 7500. Does that tell you who won?



Hilbert

It tells you the person who set 7500 didn't get to keep it. Either the other pilot overrode it, or the person who set it lost control of the panel. What it doesn't tell you is whether the person who set it was the aggressor or the person trying to signal for help. Both are possible. Someone trying to warn the ground that the other pilot has gone rogue would also set 7500. The code is a signal, not a confession.



Corn

That's a good detail to end on. Let's pull the threads together.



Herman

The thing I keep sitting with is that the official line is internally inconsistent. Not a hijacking, and the pilot sought to hijack the aircraft. Both on the record. And the 7500 sequence is unexplained. By the time anyone hears this, the cockpit voice recorder may have settled it. Or it may not.



Corn

The two things that don't resolve. The rogue crew member is the one case El Al's model doesn't fully cover, because the pilot has the codes and the door. And the Iran-turn question has no published answer at all. Every source we found stops at the same place.



Herman

The escort framing is comforting. The shoot-down ladder is not. And the gap between those two words is where the real story lives.



Corn

That's the show for today. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.