

Criminalization of Aircraft Hijacking in International Law

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Abstract:

This study will be dedicated to the study of aircraft hijack in international law, with an emphasis on the nature, constituent elements and international features of aircraft hijack. The study is significant because of the development of air transportation and its need to guarantee the protection and security of civil aircraft and air navigation. Hijacking aircraft is considered one of the most dangerous crimes which may expose the lives of passengers, cause disruption to air traffic, pose a threat to public safety and create a threat to the international transportation network. For accomplishing the aim of the study, descriptive, analytical and comparative approaches were used to analyze

the legal framework surrounding aircraft hijacking and to answer important research questions related to the nature of the offence, the elements of the offence and the elements defining its international character. The results show that the international community has created a comprehensive legal system for combatting aircraft hijacking that began with the Tokyo Convention of 1963 and continued with other conventions and protocols for improving aviation security. The study also provides the basis for the need to cooperate globally and to coordinate legal action in combating this transnational offence. The research therefore suggests that states should speed up the process of harmonizing their domestic laws with the needs and developments added by the Montreal Protocol, to make the international action against aircraft hijacking more effective.

Keywords: Aircraft Hijacking; Aviation Terrorism; Civil Aviation Security; International Criminal Law; Montreal Protocol; Tokyo Convention

Introduction

Air transport has materialized as a significant part of the global communications, trade, tourism and economic growth pyramid. Air transportation is faster, more efficient and worldly than other modes of transport, facilitating the swift transport of people and cargo across borders. International civil aviation has made great contributions to the process of globalization and international assistance and will continue to do so. The use of air vehicles has created new security problems, however, such as the hijacking of aircraft, sabotage, taking of hostages and other illegal activities against civil aviation. These acts jeopardize the safety of passengers and crew and the stability of the international transportation system as well as the benefit of the international community.

Transnational criminal activity in the form of aircraft hijacking has raised international alarms and has resulted in the creation of legal and security frameworks to safeguard civil aviation by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the States. States tried to develop a complete legal structure that would inhibit any unlawful interference with aircraft and could ensure the punishment of those who restricted. These actions demonstrate the understanding that hijacking aircraft is not just a domestic criminal act but is commonly a crime of international dimensions that can impact more than one jurisdiction at a time (1, 2).

The concept of aircraft hijacking from the viewpoint of International Law entails several questions of state jurisdiction, extradition, international cooperation in cases of

crime, and the fulfilment of treaty obligations. Many hijacking happenings are transnational, with the aircraft registered in one state, with the plane departing from another, the plane landing in another and the offender living in another. As a result, international conventions have been a key element in harmonizing legal measures and providing a basis for uniform criminalization and prosecution.

Aviation Law is one of the most alarming challenges to universal aviation safety and security, which is aircraft hijacking. Aviation law aims to control aircraft flights, safeguard passengers and crew, manage airport safety and security and provide liability and enforcement procedures for those who interfere with aircraft flights. International aviation law has evolved over time, with the adoption of numerous international conventions and agreements that address new threats and technological advancements, such as the Tokyo Convention of 1963, the Hague Convention of 1970, the Montreal Convention of 1971, the Beijing Convention of 2010, and the Montreal Protocol of 2014.

In the context of Criminal Law, aircraft hijacking is an enormously grave offence in which the aircraft is seized or controlled by force, threats, coercion or any other unlawful means. The offense could jeopardize human life, public safety, international transportation and have serious economic and political repercussions. Therefore, many national legal systems have implemented strict penalties for aircraft hijacking and related crimes, considering them aggravated offenses given the bearing that they may have on national and international security.

There have been a lot of studies written on aircraft hijacking in the last few decades. Initial research concentrated largely on the delineation of the offense and the analysis of the legal options brought about by the Tokyo, Hague and Montreal conventions. The relation between aircraft hijacking and international terrorism was the subject of later studies by scholars such as Refaat, Fathi and Rashed, while other studies were dedicated to the provisions of international treaties regarding jurisdiction and state obligations. Few recent studies have looked at the effectiveness of international legal instruments in combating aviation terrorism and grappling with new security threats. More modern topics of research have contained the effects of technological progress, cyber-attacks on aviation infrastructure, the employment of drone aircraft and the problems of modern-day transnational terrorism.

Although numerous books have been published about aircraft hijacking, there are still several scholarly questions unanswered by any book. The other debate is whether the

existing international law (which is currently in place) is effective in combating new threats that are not traditional aircraft apprehension. The other is how far to extend the scope of universal jurisdiction to aviation-related crimes and whether current extradition mechanisms offer adequate remedies to thwart safe havens for criminals. In addition, legal experts remain in dispute about how effective national laws are as they interact to international treaties and the implementation of international aviation security standards.

The on-going legal developments have also fueled academic debates. The Beijing Convention of 2010 and the Montreal Protocol of 2014 are indicators of the international community's ongoing efforts to modernize the international legal framework on aviation security and the new types of unlawful interference. The progression of these developments has sparked rethinking of the links between international criminal law, aviation security and state responsibility for transnational crimes impacting civil aviation.

Despite these contributions, there is a huge gap in literature. Prior research has been devoted to the historical evolution of aircraft hijacking, to certain international conventions or to general aviation terrorist studies. Fewer studies offer a connected analysis that analyzes the nature of the crime, the elements of a misconduct, and the “international” nature of the crime under the interwoven frameworks of the three laws: International Law, Aviation Law and Criminal Law. Furthermore, little research has focused on the impact of recent developments in international law on the definition, typology, and criminalization of aircraft hijacking in the modern legal framework.

Therefore, the novelty of this study is that it observes the phenomenon of aircraft hijacking from a multidisciplinary legal perspective, with a combination of the international legal principles and aviation law regulations and the criminal law doctrines. The study objects to fill the gap by presenting a consistent approach to the analysis of the offence, explaining its nature and components, and examining the factors internationalizing the offence. The work advances current legal research and provides policy and practitioner guidance to those absorbed in aviation security.

The research problem is positioned around the legal nature of the aircraft hijacking and the elements which compose it, the legal criterion by which the offence becomes international. The significance of this research is due to the shocking impact of aircraft hijacking on humanity, economics, law and security, as well as the ongoing requirement for international law to respond effectively to this practice (3).

The study thus focuses on the following main research questions:

- What is the legal nature of the crime of aircraft hijacking?
- What are the constituent elements required for establishing the crime of aircraft hijacking?
- How is the international character of the crime of aircraft hijacking determined under contemporary international law?

Methodology

The study used the qualitative approach in the process of legal research (4), which was accepted out by descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods, to analyze the crime of aircraft hijacking in the framework of International Law, Aviation Law and Criminal Law. The methodological design was chosen due to the discipline matter which requires interpretation of legal rules, international conventions, national legislation and scholarly legal writing and not gathering of empirical or statistical data (5).

Descriptive method was used to recognize and explain the legal nature of aircraft hijacking, its elements and its international nature. This process included the analysis and synthesis of the legal concepts, definitions, treaty provisions and doctrinal opinions contained in international legal documents and literature. Special attention was paid to the changes in the legal aspects of aircraft hijacking and the recent progress in international action to prevent unlawful interference in civil aviation (6).

The substantive and procedural laws of aircraft hijacking were traveled through the analytical method. The study examined the provisions of the major international conventions such as the Tokyo Convention of 1963, the Hague Convention of 1970, the Montreal Convention of 1971, the Beijing Convention of 2010 and the Montreal Protocol of 2014, in this manner. The analysis was conducted on the basis of the legal definition of the crime of hijacking, the principles of authorities, the duty to extradite, the criminal responsibility, the criminal liability and the mechanisms for international cooperation. In addition, the study evaluated the effectiveness of these legal instruments to react to the current security issues in aviation and transnational crime.

A well-chosen set of primary and secondary law sources was used for the research. The main sources were international conventions, protocols, national legislation, provisions of treaties or any significant legal documents distributed by international organizations, specifically the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the United Nations. Secondary sources comprised scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles,

legal commentaries, conference papers and current research on aircraft hijacking, aviation terrorism, and international criminal law. The sources selected were due to their legal status, academic relevance, contribution to the topic and the fact that they matched the aims of the research.

Furthermore, a comparison of the legal systems was used in the analysis of similarities and differences in the criminalization of aircraft hijacking in selected legal systems. The proportional study was mainly conducted in respect of the legal framework of France, Egypt, Algeria, Italy and the other countries mentioned in the literature and in the conventions. These jurisdictions were chosen due to the diverse legal traditions they have and the specific legislation that has been passed with regards to aviation security and aircraft hijacking.

To set up this comparative framework, a few parameters of comparison were used:

- The legal definition and classification of aircraft hijacking;
- The constituent elements required for establishing criminal liability;
- The scope of national and extraterritorial jurisdiction;
- Extradition obligations and international cooperation mechanisms;
- The nature and severity of criminal sanctions imposed on offenders; and
- The extent of compliance between domestic legislation and international treaty obligations.

The study purposes at harmonizing the descriptive, analytical and comparative approach of legal analysis to be able to proposition a comprehensive legal assessment of aircraft hijacking and to assess how far international and national legal instruments can help in the prevention, criminalization and prosecution of this transnational crime. This methodological approach also helps in understanding the interconnection of civil aviation security aspects with domestic legal systems and international legal standards.

Results

Evolution of the International Legal Framework Governing Aircraft Hijacking

International law has advanced and matured in the past few decades to respond to the changing menace of aircraft hijacking to civil aviation. First, the attempt to assert jurisdiction and board control on aircraft was made; and second, an attempt to maintain order on board aircraft was made. But, in the 1960s and 1970s, hijacking increased in volume and political incentive and legal means began to criminalize, extradite and strengthen international cooperation.

The first concerted international action for the control of offences on aircraft was the Tokyo Convention of 1963. The Gathering did not define aircraft hijacking as an offence under the law, nor did it impose any requirement on the States to prosecute aircraft hijackers but established some rules of jurisdiction and gave the aircraft commander some powers to establish order. This handicapped its usefulness in fighting hijacking (7, 8).

These weaknesses were identified and highlighted when hijacking increased in the late Sixties, and the Hague Convention of 1970 was put in place. The Hague Convention was more ambitious than the Tokyo Convention and added 'unlawful seizure of aircraft' to the list of international crimes, as well as requiring the contracting states to impose harsh criminal sanctions. The Convention represented a paradigm modify from an approach that was "reactive" and based on jurisdiction, to a "preventive and punitive" approach that seeks to discourage offenders and improve international enforcement.

Later, broader protection was extended to international aviation through adoption of the more general Montreal Convention of 1971 which extended to more serious unlawful acts against the safety of civil aviation, including aircraft destruction, sabotage and attacks on aviation facilities. Subsequent instruments since that time have helped to update the legal instruments, including the Beijing Convention 2010 and the Montreal Protocol 2014, to address new threats like the use of aircraft as weapons, interference with aircraft systems and aircraft associated with transnational terrorism. The advances illustrate the fact that international aviation law has always been responsive to security threats, rather than being stuck in conventional aircraft hijacking (9, 10).

Jurisdictional Challenges in Aircraft Hijacking Cases

Jurisdiction remains one of the most complex issues in the legal regulation of aircraft hijacking. Because such crimes frequently involve multiple states, determining the competent authority to investigate and prosecute offenders requires the application of several jurisdictional principles recognized in international law.

- Territorial Jurisdiction

Territorial jurisdiction is the traditional ground of criminal jurisdiction and naturally the prosecution is within the jurisdiction of the state where the offence is committed. Territorial jurisdiction can be complex, however, in aircraft hijacking cases, as the offense may start, proceed through international airspace and end in another state. Therefore, international law allows several states to have jurisdiction over legible territorial links.

While jurisdiction is still important, it might not be sufficient when aircraft are diverted to another country or when the offenders intentionally cross the borders to countries where they have no place to seek refuge. The limitation played an officer role in the formulation of supplemental principles of jurisdiction in the aviation conventions.

- Nationality Jurisdiction

Nationality jurisdiction is the basis on which the states could have criminal jurisdictions over their citizens, irrespective of the place of commission of the violation. In the case of aircraft hijacking, the nationality jurisdiction plays a significant role, if the perpetrator and/or victim of an aircraft hijacking has the nationality of a specific state. It ensures that if serious aviation offences are entrusted outside the country, they cannot escape punishment.

But problems could occur if several states at the same time have jurisdiction because of network to nationals. This type of scenario demands interstate collaboration to prevent conflicting prosecutions and to ensure procedural fairness (11, 12).

- Universal Jurisdiction and International Cooperation

The most important development in terms of aviation security law has been the progressive development of universal jurisdiction-type regimes. Matching the Hague Convention and later instruments, states must either investigate or prosecute all those found within their borders or must hand them over to another state that is prepared and able to prosecute. This greatly decreases the likelihood of the terroristic escaping punishment by going across the national border (13, 14).

The principles of universal jurisdiction are particularly relevant in the contemporary context of offences committed by stateless actors, threats to aviation infrastructure or international terrorist groups that are carried out via computers. However, this jurisdiction has yet to be proven to be of any utility, a fact evidenced by recent events at the national, political, and diplomatic level (15, 16).

Discussion

The Principle of Aut Dedere Aut Judicare (Extradite or Prosecute)

The most valuable rule in the law of aircraft hijacking is "extradite or prosecute" -- or "aut dedere aut judicare)," as it is often put. This principle requires a state where an alleged offender is found to either hand him over to alternative competent state or to send him to its own prosecuting authorities (17, 18).

The principle has a few significant aims. First, it will stop offenders from taking advantage of jurisdictional loopholes between states. Secondly, it helps international co-operation by increasing the punishment for serious aviation crime. Third, it encourages standardization of international aviation security standards.

The principle is important but is not always easy to put into practice. The refusal of extradition can be justified on political grounds, due to concerns about human rights protection, lack of bilateral extradition treaties, or differences in criminal laws. This means that states often end up in a situation of competing treaty obligations and constitutional and human rights demands (19, 8).

Critical Assessment of International Legal Instruments

While international conventions have played a large part in decreasing the traditional aircraft hijacking, it should not be overemphasized as to their effectiveness. There are several factors which affect the effectiveness of these instruments and include the degree to which they are implemented domestically, international cooperation and the capacity of enforcement (20, 21).

One of the key advantages of the aviation security conventions is that they keep a shared legal framework and standardized requirements for states. Conventions have increased the consistency in the law and have encouraged mutual legal assistance and extradition through criminalization of hijacking and associated crime.

But there are some shortcomings. Usually, States use international treaties and enforce them; thus, their efficiency will rely on the implementation and enforcement ability of each State. Some states are still having difficulties with modernizing laws, aviation security resources or developing specialized investigations skills (22, 23).

Moreover, threats are not equivalent to those that were suggested in previous conventions based on the model of hijacking. Today's dangers include cyberattacks on aviation infrastructure, use of unmanned aerial systems and insiders and advanced transnational terrorist operations. The developments raise doubts as to existing legislation and should be continually adjusted by international regulatory frameworks.

National Implementation and Enforcement Challenges

That's why national implementation is so important to the effectiveness of international aviation law. Most states have enacted national laws that integrate international obligations, and have made aircraft hijacking crime, set up investigative processes, and provided for international cooperation.

However, there are still some challenges to overcome in implementing this effectively such as (24, 25):

- Changes in domestic criminal laws;
- Differences in extradition laws and procedures;
- Limited institutional and technical resources in certain jurisdictions;
- Difficulties in obtaining cross-border evidence;
- Political considerations affecting international cooperation; and
- Delays in harmonizing national laws with newly adopted international instruments.

The challenges underscore the need for treaty ratification not to be enough. Key to achieving this will be the need for legislative reform, judicial capacity building, training of law enforcement and the need for ongoing cooperation between countries.

Human Rights Considerations in Combating Aircraft Hijacking

Every effort to be made to stop aircraft hijackings should be in protection with internationally accepted human rights standards. States have a legitimate interest in protecting civil aviation and public security, however, measures against counter-hijacking should not be at the expense of basic legal protections (26, 27).

Problems occur with arrest, detention, extradition and criminal prosecution. The accused in aircraft hijacking have a right to enjoy the agreements of due process, such as the presumption of innocence, right to legal counsel, right to a fair trial, and freedom from arbitrary arrest.

Similarly, the extradition procedure has to conform to the conditions of human rights. A state may deny extradition if there are significant grounds to doubt that the accused may be subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, or politically motivated prosecution or that a fair trial will not be afforded. Thus, the modern concept of aviation security law is a compromise between security effectiveness and respect for individual rights and procedural justice.

Comparative Legal Approaches to Aircraft Hijacking

Comparative analysis also shows many similarities and differences between the several national legal systems with respect to aircraft hijacking.

France classifies "unlawful seizure of aircraft" as a specific crime and sets harsh penalties including those that can be intensified in the event of the loss of life or serious

injury. Deterrence and adherence to international treaty obligations are strong emphases in French law (18).

Aircraft hijacking is also a very serious crime in Egypt, which is classified as a terrorist offence and a public security offence. The Egyptian legal system has increased penalties for cases involving injury, death, or an intimidation to national security, such as life in prison or death penalty in cases of serious hijacking (19, 26).

Italy has adopted international aviation security requirements by special legislation that has enhanced its preventive and punitive measures. In Italy, both criminal sanctions and institutional cooperation mechanisms are underlined.

Algerian law also emphasizes the intent of the crime, any attempted crime and involvement in hijacking operations, thereby holding people liable for illegal seizure beyond the finalized crime.

All the jurisdictions examined have common goals in protecting civil aviation, holding accountable those who violate aviation security laws and regulations, and meeting aviation security convention requirements. The comparative analysis also shows that prevention must not only be met with very strong sanctions but also be supported by an efficient system of airport security, the sharing of intelligence and international coordination (28, 29).

Conclusion

The illegal operations against civil aviation remain one of the most severe problems of aviation industry in the international arena. In particular, the threat to passenger safety, crew security, to the aviation infrastructure and to international transportation systems is earnest in the case of aircraft hijacking. Risks of unlawful interference do not only occur on board aircraft but also within airports, aviation facilities and other elements of the civil aviation environment. As a result, the security of civil aviation is now a cooperative responsibility that must be carried out jointly at the national and international level.

The study showed the development of international aviation law is intimately connected to the development of threats to civil aviation. The international community gradually developed a wide-ranging legal regime to prevent the unlawful seizure of aircraft, establish criminal accountability, improve the cooperation between countries, and growth aviation security, beginning with the Tokyo Convention. Later legal instruments broadened the protection and added more powerful means of reacting to new types of illegal interference.

The analysis also identified a few legal attributes that would support the classification of aircraft hijacking as a transnational crime. Multiple jurisdictional principles must be applied with the international nature of the offense, such as territorial, nationality, and presence of the offender. The study also underscored the need for the international cooperation mechanisms, especially the principle of “extradite or prosecute” (aut dedere aut judicare), to make sure that offenders cannot escape from criminal responsibility.

Because of the results of this study, the following conclusions and recommendations are made:

- The increasing occurrence of unlawful acts affecting civil aviation prompted the International Civil Aviation Organization and the international community to develop legal and security frameworks aimed at protecting aircraft, passengers, crew members, and aviation facilities.
- International conventions have played a crucial role in reducing incidents of aircraft hijacking by establishing common legal standards, harmonizing criminalization measures, and facilitating international cooperation among states.
- States should accelerate the harmonization of their domestic legislation with contemporary international aviation security instruments to ensure full compliance with evolving international obligations.
- The evolution from the Tokyo Convention to more recent legal instruments demonstrate the continuous effort of states and international organizations to address legal gaps and adapt aviation security regulations to contemporary threats.
- National authorities should make full use of the jurisdictional powers available under international aviation conventions, particularly in situations involving aircraft registration, landing, operation, or the presence of alleged offenders within their territories.
- Greater investment should be directed toward preventive aviation security measures, including technological screening systems, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and specialized training for aviation security personnel.

Limitations of the Study

This study has been done with a small sample size.

There are a few limitations to this study. Firstly, the research is predominantly doctrinal based and as such, the emphasis lies not on empirical research on enforcement practices, but on legal texts, international conventions, and literature. The second point of the study is that the study fails to make a thorough attempt at examining all the national legal systems that regulate aircraft hijacking but rather examines selected jurisdictions. Third, changes in legal developments in the era of evolving aviation technologies and new threats to security may be beyond the scope of the present analysis.

Future Research Directions

There are some areas that may be expanded on in future studies.

- Legal dimensions of cyberattacks on aviation systems and the connection among traditional aircraft hijacking crimes and cybercrime.
- Research evaluation of the national implementation measures in the different states after the ratification of the latest aviation security instruments.
- Conducting empirical studies on the practical application of extradition and prosecution mechanisms in aircraft hijacking cases.
- Assessing the impact of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and unmanned aerial systems, on aviation security law and international criminal responsibility.
- Exploring the balance between aviation security measures and the protection of fundamental human rights in counterterrorism and aviation enforcement operations.

Finally, the security and safety of international civil aviation are a continuous legal process that needs to be developed, effectively implemented, respected, and cooperation between States and international organizations needs to be maintained. These activities are still critical to dealing with the current and future challenges to aviation security.

Abbreviations

AI – Artificial Intelligence

ICAO – International Civil Aviation Organization

ICC – International Criminal Court

UAS – Unmanned Aircraft Systems

UN – United Nations

UNODC – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Ajloun National University for their academic support, encouragement and facilitation in the execution of this research.

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Ziad Mohammad Al Wahshat: Conceptualization, Supervision, Investigation, Validation, Legal Framework Development, Writing – Review & Editing.

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All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no known competing financial interests, personal relationships or professional affiliations that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

No datasets were generated, collected, or analyzed during the current study. Therefore, data sharing is not applicable to this research.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors employed ChatGPT (OpenAI) and other AI-assisted language editing tools during the preparation of this manuscript only to edit and correct the language, grammar, sentence refinement, and academic writing style. The study does not include research ideas, the analysis of legal sources, the interpretation, the legal, substantive arguments, the results, conclusions, or recommendations generated using an AI tool. The authors have read the manuscript thoroughly, checked for accuracy, verified the originality and integrity and took full responsibility for the work. Moreover, this manuscript did not contain any figures, tables, images or graphical materials generated by AI.

Ethics Approval

Not applicable. Not applicable. This study is conducted only by law analysis, international conventions, legislation and published academic sources, and does not involve human participants, animals, personal data, and confidential information.

Funding

Not applicable. This study is conducted only by law analysis, international conventions, legislation and published academic sources, and does not involve human participants, animals, personal data, and confidential information.

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