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Leila's Prophecy

by Philip Baum

Nineteen months ago, as some readers may recall, I met Leila Khaled in a hotel in Amman. I interviewed her for ASI in an attempt to gain some understanding as to the persona of a hijacker. At the time, a realistic possibility for peace between Israelis and Palestinians was seemingly only a handshake away, so I was also keen to establish whether she considered her actions had helped bring about the Palestinian State.

I asked her for her opinion on the 'peace process'. She replied, "What peace process? Arafat has sold out the Palestinian people". Albeit that Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who, like Leila, was himself a celebrity of avsec history, had just offered a more far-reaching deal that many could have envisaged – the creation of a Palestinian State, including East Jerusalem and 85% of the West Bank – Leila wanted much more. In effect, the destruction of Israel by demanding the right of return to all Palestinians displaced in 1948. For her there was no compromise. It was better to have no state at all than accept a solution that would also legitimise Israel's right to exist and finalise the delineation of Israel's borders.

Leila had not learned the lessons of history. In 1947, when the United Nations voted to create two states – Israel and Palestine – the Palestinian leadership opted for armed struggle to gain the whole rather than accept the half. They ended up with nothing. War after war, intifada after intifada, the only outcome for a people who, even in the eyes of many Israelis, need a homeland of their own, has been deprivation, humiliation and despair.

Nobody could have expected the conflict in the Holy Land to be resolved without a

hitch; it has, of course, been a battleground for centuries. Yet, equally, there was a sense of optimism at the close of the last millennium – an optimism that, in front of the eyes of the world, has evaporated into the abyss from which it came. The world sits horrified at the effect of the conflict on people's lives in the region and the long-term implications for global peace. With every funeral, now too plentiful to be individually newsworthy, the hatred grows and the prospects for us all worsen.

September 11th shocked the world with the scale of the attacks and the new arena in which they were perpetrated. Yet suicide

terrorism is de rigueur in the Middle East as each supposedly highly intelligent, yet brainwashed and misguided, individual after individual queues up to be the next 'martyr'. The reality is that no paradise awaits, no virgins will be there to pamper to their every whim and all they succeed in doing is to further jeopardise the possibility for their own brethren to live in peace.

One only has to view the images of Israeli tanks patrolling the narrow streets of Palestinian towns to see the effect of the suicide bombings. It is a necessary evil to root out the terrorist cells that hide unashamedly in the midst of civilian populations and who luxuriate in the devastation they cause; on occasions when Israel has practised restraint, the masked orchestrators of the suicide bombers have smelt victory in the air and carried out even more attacks.

Where the current conflict will end nobody knows. It has the potential to spiral out of control and become a war that will involve many other states in the region. The best hope relies on a change in leadership. Ariel Sharon is like a red rag to a bull who, as an individual, has limited respect in Israel or from its supporters overseas who yearn for a Rabinesque figure to be at the helm. Indeed, had it not been for the fact that the current intifada started under Barak's leadership, one could have almost justified Palestinian exasperation at having to deal with the likes of Sharon. Yet terrorist acts were the cause of

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his coming to power, with Israelis sensing the need for a "no nonsense" leader.

The Palestinians themselves are leaderless. Arafat is little more than a political puppet who has either no ability or no desire to control the extremists, nor does he have the courage to force his police to clamp down on them effectively. One can almost sense that this is a man who would prefer to die for the cause rather than to make peace. He runs scared of the extremists and seems to yearn for his gun-toting terrorist days. This is the man who won the Nobel peace prize! The fact that he is still alive at all indicates the fear the Israelis have that, should Arafat die, an even more hard-line leader would likely replace him.

Whilst I firmly believe that Palestinian leaders have been the authors of their own downfall and that their association with terror

has done little to aid their cause, it is all too apparent that terrorist attacks will continue.

I am not trying to paint the Israelis as being whiter than white either. I acknowledge that the fact that the Israeli State exists at all was, in part, due to terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Stern Gang,

"...Sharon is like a red rag to a bull..."

albeit directed against (British) military targets. Furthermore, the lack of investment in the Israeli Arab towns has fuelled support for the intifada, the continuation of the settlement development programme has done little to alleviate Palestinian concern that the West Bank will ever be theirs for keeps, the religious zealots' perceived disregard for Palestinian aspirations revolts both sides and Sharon's election as Prime Minister was probably the final nail in the coffin.

Yet other stakeholders must also acknowledge their failings. We must remember that pre-1967 the West Bank was in Jordan and the Gaza Strip was in Egypt. Neither of those countries, both of whom have now made peace with Israel, considered the possibility of creating a Palestinian state in those areas.

The implications for the aviation industry are ominous. We are too well aware of what terrorists can do. From their 'ethical' point of view, there is little difference in a suicidal terrorist's mind between murdering more than 20 civilians who have gone out to eat in an Israeli restaurant and acts of genocide such as those perpetrated in New York and Washington.

America is in a no-win situation. Their support for Israel has always made them a

target for terrorist acts and, as the Arab-Israeli conflict escalates out of control, more incidents will surely follow.

I would like to believe that all those who see themselves as part of the aviation security industry also consider themselves to be part of the struggle against terrorism.

Accordingly, even for those of us who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, there is a need to clearly recognise that the threat to aviation is at its highest from the significant numbers of so-called supporters of that cause who like to exploit the average Palestinian's plight by way of 'jihad'.

All Arabs are suffering humiliation at airport screening checkpoints given the very real association between terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. In the same way that President Bush is telling Israel to

"...the suicidal terrorist may see a crowded passenger terminal as an ideal deathbed from which to commence his journey to paradise..."

distinguish between Palestinians and terrorists, we too face the daily, albeit incomparable, task of carrying out a similar profiling of passengers. We all like to consider ourselves as fair-minded, non-discriminatory individuals who will screen all passengers in an even-handed manner. That said, it comes as no surprise that, when looking for the next Leila Khaled or Mohammad Atta, our checks begin with those of a sim-

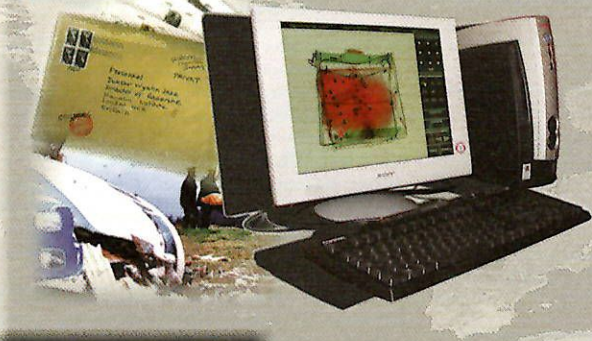
ilar ethnic origin. This is deeply regrettable. It's amazing how quickly the likes of Timothy McVeigh can be forgotten.

In many previous editorials I have raised my concerns at the limitations of security technology and the lack of emphasis on human factors. The type of threat we now face means that we must also give much greater consideration to the likelihood of airport attacks. Screening points create their own security problems, especially at times of heightened security when the numbers awaiting checks swell as passengers wait in line. Many of the suicidal attacks in Israel, including last year's Tel Aviv discotheque bombing, were carried out as people waited to enter sterile zones. The suicidal terrorist of tomorrow may well view a crowded passenger terminal as an ideal deathbed from which to commence their journey to paradise. All the more reason for patrols of airport pub-

lic areas, CCTV and training all airport-based staff in behavioural analysis. It's also a strong argument for decentralising passenger screening.

Hatred reigns. Palestinians continue to be repressed, humiliated and stateless as Israel wages its war on terrorism. Maybe Leila Khaled was right. What peace process? And, if she is right, we'd better be ready too. ☺

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