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September 11th Syndrome

by Philip Baum

Was it an act of terrorism or was it an isolated incident perpetrated by a misguided individual? This was the question being asked in the immediate aftermath of the shooting at the El Al ticket counter in Los Angeles on July 4. Given the target being the Israeli national carrier and the perpetrator being of Egyptian descent, it was easy to assume that terrorism was the cause. Whilst, in the past, the fact that Hadayet must have known he would be killed in the incident would have immediately classified him as insane, in this era of the suicidal terrorist, anything seemed possible. In reality, however, it would appear that such an assessment could have been too hasty.

I certainly do not wish to open up the age-old semantic debate on the meaning of the word 'terrorism', but would rather examine whether or not it makes any difference to the aviation security fraternity as to what the motive was.

Terrorist acts have the potential at least to be prevented granted effective intelligence whereas individual acts come as more of a surprise. The effect for the families left behind in any "successful" mission is the same. In the words of Yakov Aminov's widow when speculating on the reason behind the Los Angeles shooting, "He's dead, and he's not going to come back." And, for Victoria Chen, a new recruit to our industry as an El Al ticket agent, who died that Independence Day, the cause is irrelevant.

Perhaps for us too there should be little difference. Our goal is to prevent any unlawful attack against civil aviation, whether it be the calculated mission of a sophisticated terrorist organisation or the actions of a deranged individual.

It is all too easy to downplay many of the incidents this year as being of little significance. In any other year they would

have warranted far greater coverage, yet the world's media has geared us to expect the spectacular rather than the ordinary. In the aftermath of September 11 we were told to expect similar attacks. We were preparing for chemical and biological attacks and the anthrax scare fuelled our fears. The spate of suicide attacks around the world, not only in the Middle East, is ominous, especially when there is every indication that children are being brought up to aspire to commit suicide to attain martyrdom. Few readers could not have been horrified by the image of a Palestinian baby supposedly dressed for a fancy dress party donning a suicide belt that the Israeli authorities discovered during one of their recent incursions into the West Bank.

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Scared we should be, or alert at the very least, yet we must not lose sight of the traditional risks to which we are exposed.

Whilst we warn aircrews of the effects of Stockholm Syndrome and London Syndrome, we are starting to succumb to the latest syndrome of all - September 11th Syndrome.

All syndromes need a definition, so here's mine: September 11th Syndrome is the industry's ability to succumb to the mistaken belief that all future acts perpetrated against civil aviation will be carried out by suicidal Middle Eastern terrorists armed with box cutters.

Those that suffer most seem to have decided that only Middle Eastern passengers pose a threat and that the only real defence

is to off-load them and, as a safeguard, seal off the flight deck and arm the pilots.

Somehow we need to acknowledge that September 11, tragedy though it was, exposed many of the weaknesses in our system, yet that a tremendous amount of good has come out of it over the course of the past eleven months. It's now up to us to utilise the equipment deployed, the procedures effected and the public goodwill to their best advantage.

We have a wonderful opportunity to curb airport crime through enhanced staff screening, to better screen suspect passengers given the technologies at our fingertips and to harness the enthusiasm of a generally more motivated workforce. Yet the honeymoon period will not last long. An

absence (hopefully) of sensational attacks for a prolonged period will, I fear, start to diminish our sense of threat.

This would be tragic as the industry continues to suffer from the much lower-impact crimes perpetrated by asylum seekers, mentally deranged individuals and common criminals, all of whom we are deployed to guard against.

Training for all staff, from screeners to ground handling agents and aircrew to station management, needs to address September 11 as an isolated incident rather than to rewrite the textbook. Yes, it was the day the world changed. Yes, the way in which any of us may act on a flight that is hijacked or has a disruptive passenger on board will change. But no, it has not all

changed. The traditional threats still exist and wherever you are in the world you are exposed to them.

I shudder when I hear airline and airport management state "we don't have that type of threat". Yes you do. You may not have to deal with Mohamed Atta, but you could well have to deal with a Thomas Hamilton (of Dunblane massacre fame) or Martin Bryant (of Port Arthur, Tasmania, massacre notoriety). Your aircraft are exposed to misuse by individuals with a more traditional suicidal disposition like Paul Mukonyi (British Airways cockpit intruder) or Charles Bishop (Tampa, 2002). And, any airport could be the stage for a Hadayet-style (Los Angeles, 2002) or Gott-style (New Orleans, 2002) shootout.

Furthermore, being a global industry, we must recognise the threats that are very real in other parts of the world. South America, and in particular Colombia, has experienced a marked increase in the number of attacks against civil aviation. Understandably distracted by the more potent images still being shown of the "Attack on America", the

media has failed to drive home the risk to which the industry is exposed by the likes of the FARC and ELN. Whilst the motive in the last such hijack was the kidnapping of a Colombian senator and the passengers and crew were exposed to limited harm, the very fact that they forced the pilot to land on a road could well have endangered the lives of


some momentum, yet the fact that gunfire was required at all inflight should be of concern to us all.

The plague of the suicidal terrorist shows no sign of being eradicated. Indeed, the perpetrators and their supporters seem to glory in reprisal attacks against their bases as if it justified their missions all the more. The avi-

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all on board. With there being an estimated 12,000 kidnapping worldwide per annum, it is a threat we should not underestimate.

In June, we witnessed another domestic hijacking where Ethiopian Airlines was the target. It would appear that the hijackers were killed by armed security guards. The case for the sky marshal may have gained

ation industry cannot underestimate the threat to which we are exposed, yet we also cannot allow ourselves to succumb to some kind of paranoia that clouds our judgement and our ability to react to, and defend against, the asylum seeker, criminal, traditional terrorist and mentally unstable. That would be September 11 Syndrome... 



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