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Speaking With The Enemy

by Philip Baum

I had the telephone number. I simply had to dial it. I paused, but curiosity got the better of me...

There are certain names that are synonymous with the history of attacks against aviation. Nezar Hindawi, Ulli Derrickson, Yonatan Netanyahu, Wong lo, Anne Marie Murphy, Kim Huon Hui, D.B. Cooper, Ramzi Youssef. And, Leila Khaled. Perpetrators, unwitting accomplices, and heroes...

For security instructors around the globe, such characters have become part of their daily lives, the examples, the individuals whose own actions, for better or for worse, have had a significant impact on our lives.

I had decided to write an article for this issue of Aviation Security International on Dawson's Field. It was after all, the 30th anniversary of the incident. Yet I was looking for a new perspective. I didn't want to simply regurgitate a well-known tale. How about looking at the incident from a hijacker's angle? Why not speak with Leila Khaled herself? To be honest, when she answered the phone, I was somewhat surprised. I hadn't actually expected her to answer. And then to speak with me at length...

“ the Leila Khaled of today is a far cry from the girl branded as the hijack queen ”

I put the phone down and sat, quietly in my office. Leila Khaled had agreed to a face-to-face interview in Amman, two weeks later.

I must admit that for a moment, I thought that maybe I'd got through to a different Leila Khaled since it sudden-

ly dawned on me that I hadn't actually asked her whether she was THE Leila Khaled!

There can be no doubt that the prospect of meeting her was actually quite exciting. Apart from a professional interest, the earliest news stories I can recall from my childhood were the Apollo 11 moon landing and the multi-skyjack at Dawson's Field. However, I then became acutely aware that interviewing such an individual and publishing her story might not be appreciated by all. She was, after all, the enemy. I am only too well aware of the fact that her actions in 1969 and 1970 were designed to create publicity for her cause and that, whatever one thinks about the legitimacy of objectives, the methodology utilised is not one we can condone. And yet, here I was, a player within the aviation security industry, about to provide a vehicle by which she could express her opinions. And, without the hijackings, her voice would probably not be heard. Certainly a dilemma.

I'm sure many readers will feel that I should not have given her this outlet. Yet I disagree. Aviation Security International is an industry publication and I believe that, as such, it has a role to play in educating people within the industry. One of the avenues we need to explore is what motivates an individual, or an organisation, to carry out an act of aerial piracy. And, what better way to do it than to hear the views of a perpetrator? The interview has been reproduced in this issue as a straight question and answer piece, without comment as to the accuracy of her statements. I am sure that most readers are reasonably familiar with the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and as such I haven't felt the need to provide the

opposing arguments.

Whilst I do not believe that the fact that the hijackings she perpetrated were over thirty years ago exonerates her in any way, I do think that the Leila

“ I shook a hand that has held grenades on board an El Al flight ”

Khaled of today is a far cry from the girl branded as the "hijack queen" or "glamour girl of international terrorism". She is an intelligent, articulate, passionate individual whose upbringing, like all of us, has dictated the course of her life.

I feel privileged to have met her. It has certainly given me a different perspective on hijacking. My belief in the criminality of such acts, regardless as to cause, has not wavered, yet that does not mean that one needs to be blind to the hijacker's side of the story. Listening and understanding may assist us in the prevention of such acts in the future.

On a much smaller scale, I now have some understanding as to what went through the minds of Rabin and Arafat when they shook hands at the White House. Two life-long enemies indicating a desire to work together for the common good.

For me, Leila Khaled has always symbolised the enemy, but now I was prepared to view her from a different perspective – someone I could learn from. I shook a hand that has held grenades on board an El Al flight and placed an explosive charge that resulted in the destruction of a TWA airliner. It was not a gesture of forgiveness, rather a symbolic act of respect for her right to an opinion and an appreciation of her agreeing to tell us her tale.