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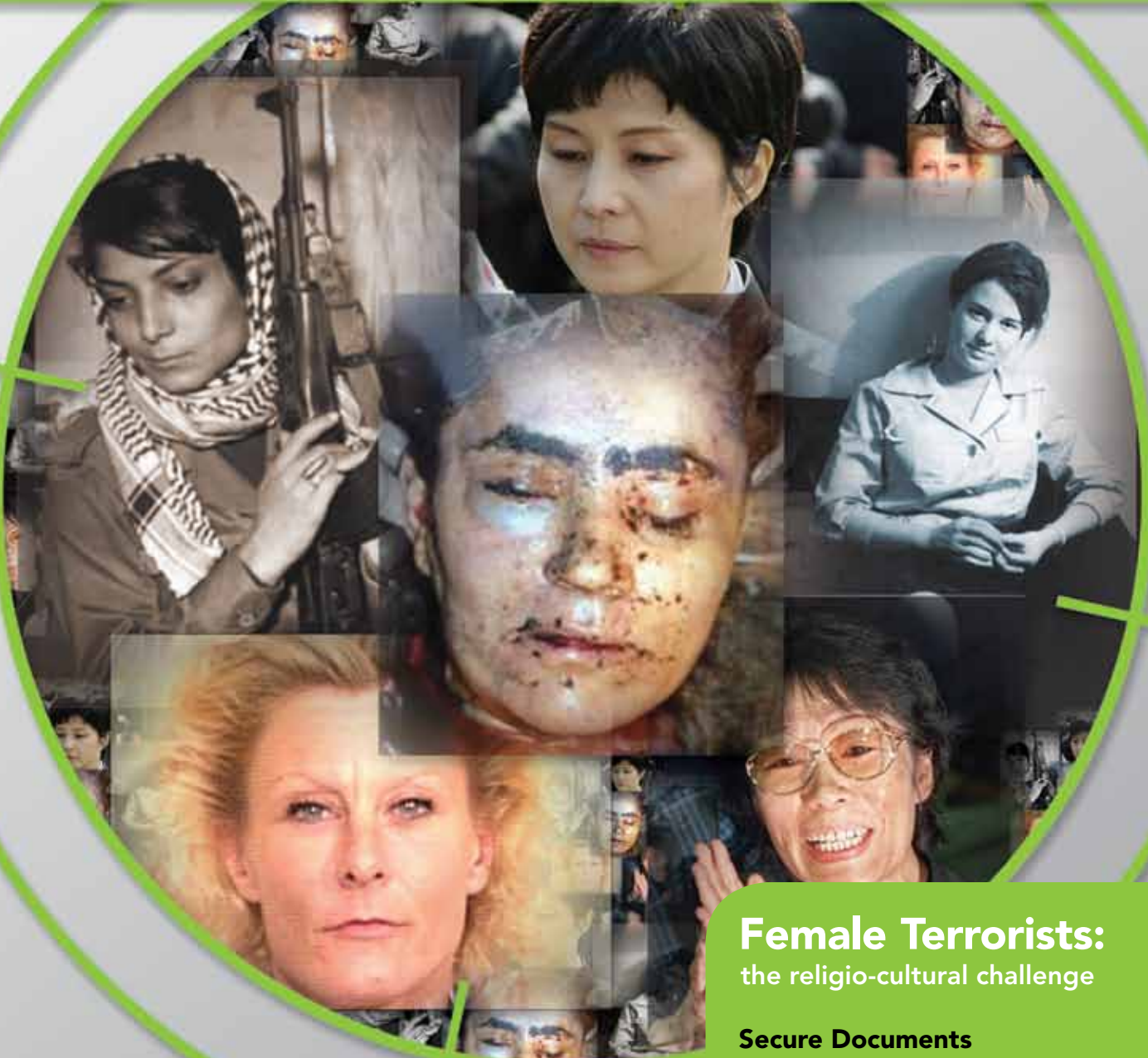
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# To Whom Do We Entrust Our Lives?:

## assessing the calibre of those on the front line

by Philip Baum

*"If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys"*

So the saying goes. Surely, as the world gears up for its huge investment in body scanners, and arguably the wrong ones, we should be asking ourselves whether some of this new found finance wouldn't be better spent by investing in people?

Year after year, at conference after conference, one hears the issue of screener pay being raised, but rarely is the matter seriously addressed. Airport security personnel are the poor relations, competing with cleaners and baggage handlers for the lowest paid airport employee award. Check-in agents, retail outlet personnel and those who perform other border security functions, such as immigration, customs and the police, all earn considerably more.

We are entrusting our lives to minimum wage employees. Perhaps, years ago, we could take the view that we would do our best with the resources available, but there would be the odd hijacking now and again and, tragic though it may be, even accept the loss of one or two aircraft each decade. Nowadays the stakes are considerably higher – if the terrorists succeed, the death toll could be of gargantuan proportion. It's not the loss of life on board the aircraft targeted, but the tens of thousands who may die in subsequent military conflict we have to consider, let alone the defence industry expenditure that makes investment in aviation security measures seem like Monopoly money.

Granted the implications of our failing to protect aviation, surely we should be ensuring that we deploy those people to our checkpoints with the greatest propensity to identify threats?

One of the founding principles of the e-border programmes that many States now have in place, whereby passenger

data is analysed by the destination country prior to the passenger boarding their flight at the point of departure, is that national security needs to begin overseas rather than at the point of entry. Immigration and customs officers traditionally protect the State by carrying out their security controls after passengers have disembarked aircraft. These people are significantly better paid than their counterparts performing aviation security duties

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prior to boarding and they are entitled to utilise screening techniques that the general public have so many qualms about when it comes to safeguarding flights. Arguably, however, the short-term stakes of a failure in our security efforts prior to take-off far outweighs those of a failure in our efforts to keep undesirable people or substances out of our countries.

I'm not just concerned about ensuring pay parity so that life is fairer. Of greater concern is who, as a result of low pay, we are actually deploying to safeguard our industry. Put another way, who does the aviation security industry attract?

In the main, low paid jobs attract low calibre applicants who are struggling to gain a foothold in a job offering better prospects and greater remuneration.

There will always be the occasional exceptional individual who is attracted to the airport environment and whose pecuniary needs are of lesser importance. The job may also be of appeal to particular groups for whom shift-work or part-time employment (if on offer) may be attractive; feedback from avsec employers in both the United Kingdom and Australia have stated that women who are returning to work after their children have either left home or have entered full-time education, and for whom the pay cheque is not the critical factor, make for excellent recruits who are likely to improve staff retention statistics. Yet, around the globe (and I know I am generalising), the majority of staff are either those with no alternative or those who are simply biding their time until a better offer arrives.

Some western governments are currently considering in investing in new technology to help those developing states who can't afford the latest hi-tech equipment. Deploying the technical solutions has little value unless the staff recruited to use them have both the ability and the mindset to do so effectively. Yes, we can provide training, but if we are installing expensive technology in an airport environment where corruption is rife, we are throwing our charitable donation down the drain. For sure the operators may know how the system operates, but if a few dollars enables somebody to bypass the machine, what did we gain?

It is the issue of mindset that I struggle with most of all. We need to know that those we deploy to our checkpoints not only know how to perform their duties but actually want to preserve the way of life and values of our society. Perhaps the greatest selling point of the Israeli approach to aviation security is not

the profiling system or even the fact that the majority of the screeners are university students, but rather that those people they employ are all post-army individuals who are extremely patriotic. They want to defend their country.

I am still troubled by the fact that, in an operational capacity at the time of the first Gulf War, I had to intervene to diffuse a situation that erupted between staff members working for the contract screening company (for whom I was then the Duty Manager) that was retained to protect TWA flights. One British Iraqi employee was, in the middle of the check-in, saying that Sadaam Hussein was going to show the Americans who was boss and was rejoicing in the Scud missile attacks on Israel! Here was an individual supposedly safeguarding an American carrier yet who was espousing

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support for its then enemy. I suspended him from the operation, despite threats and management concern that taking such a decision could result in a future legal claim.

We can cope with a lack of educational qualifications through the provision of training and subsequent testing to ensure our minimum standards are being met. We can develop motivational programmes designed to raise self esteem and put in place reward schemes that recognise the delivery of a quality service. What we can't do is combat in-house sympathies with those we are trying to protect ourselves from.

The reality is that low paid work attracts a large number of immigrant workers. The vast majority of these are normal law-abiding citizens. I am certainly not advocating racially profiling potential employees (I spend enough time arguing against that when

it comes to passengers), but we do need to know that those we deploy adhere to the values and subscribe to the freedoms of our society.

Immigration is always a touchy subject and, even though I am a descendant of immigrants to the United Kingdom myself, I am wary of being branded a racist by questioning the degree of patriotism other immigrants might have. But question it we must. Despite my heritage, I want to live as a British citizen, in a country whose values are in accordance with the Church of England. I will cheer England on as it commences its World Cup campaign this summer (and Wales on...my mother's Welsh... during rugby encounters!) and will not take offence if somebody sends me a "Merry Christmas" card. I'm British and proud to be so!

Any immigrant who embraces, and wishes to contribute to, the nation that has adopted them will probably defend that state at the checkpoint as well as, or even better than, any native. Ask Arnold Schwarzenegger!

A London taxi driver recently told me that the immigrant cabbies of a generation ago would proudly take their fare past London's historic sites and regale passengers with the history of the buildings they passed. Many of the new generation just want their fare and couldn't care less about London or its heritage and are more likely to be supporting their country of origin on the sports field than their new home.

The problem, nowadays, is that so many immigrants not only do not want to become citizens for anything other than financial gain and the passport it offers them, they actually want society to adopt their values. This presents the employer of security staff with an unenviable challenge – how to ensure that those they are taking on do genuinely wish to preserve our values.

I think the starting point must be in our actually demanding a better calibre workforce. Those who are most alienated from society are those for whom employment is hard to come by. Whilst I recognise that depriving them of a further source of income exacerbates the situation, surely the security industry is not the environment in which we should be taking altruistic

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stands to rectify the wrongs of society? I also acknowledge that many of those who wish to target our way of life are highly intelligent individuals – doctors who are prepared to drive vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices into airport terminals for example. But one has to question just how effective a security regime is when it is populated by so many who are there because it's all that is available.

I am not proposing that we reject Muslim applicants for security jobs – if we are concerned about Islamic fundamentalists, a Muslim screener is the most likely to identify them. In the United Kingdom, I am as worried about the white, Christian youngster who is there just because it pays for the beer and rent.

Turning aviation security into a profession that can be respected is achievable, but it does mean that we have to address the issue of who pays for security? It cannot escape anybody's notice that few, if any, States outsource or delegate their immigration, customs and policing controls to the private sector. So, why aviation security? It's about time that governments recognised that aviation security functions are part of our national security and that, as such, they should be funded and staffed by government employees. For those States, such as the United States, that have gone down this path and others who consider it, they need to ensure that it's not just about the uniform and the employer, it's about making sure that the salaries earned are fully commensurate with those of other security agencies operating at the airport. It will cost, but the cost of our failing to do so will be even higher. ■