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# MS804: EXPLOSIVE RESIDUE ON VICTIMS CONFIRMED

by Philip Baum

When EgyptAir flight MS804 crashed on 19 May last year, whilst en route from Paris to Cairo, speculation was rife that the disaster had been caused by a terrorist bomb. After all, modern aeroplanes don't just fall out of the sky and, considering that both Egypt and France were at the time, and continue to be, in the crosshairs of terrorist actions, it seemed to be the logical assumption. Yet, with an absence of proof, evidence of a fire on board (albeit cause unknown), and the French authorities keen for one of their gateway airports not to be the point of loading of the latest explosive charge, the security story was kept at bay.

At bay, that is, until just before Christmas. On 15th December, the Central Directorate of Aircraft Accident Investigation at the Egyptian Ministry of Civil Aviation received the forensic report relating to the victims' remains; it finally confirmed that explosive residue had been found on the bodies of the victims of the disaster. "The Egyptian Aircraft Accident Investigation Committee has transferred the case to the Egyptian Prosecution Bureau for further investigation" and another passenger jet has seemingly succumbed to a terrorist act.

The news was not new. In September, Le Figaro had reported that bodies had been found to have traces of TNT on them, but this week's announcement was the first official confirmation.

Aside from ISIS, the only entity that benefits from this latest development is Airbus; flying continues to be safe, if not secure, and the manufacturer of the jet was not at fault. For Egypt, desperately trying to resurrect its tourism industry in the aftermath of the October 2015 Metrojet bombing over the Sinai, and the subsequent cancellation of almost all European and Russian charter operations to Sharm el-Sheikh, the news could not be worse. The message, exacerbated by suicide bombing of the el-Botroseya Coptic church in Cairo on 11th December, which killed 25 people and injured dozens of others, and the 9th December bombing near the Pyramids in Giza, which killed seven people, simply illustrated that Egypt is a prime target for ISIS; the group has claimed responsibility for both the Metrojet and Botroseya church attacks as part of their "war against apostates".

France has, perhaps, benefited from the delayed confirmation of the presence of explosive residue. The story has lost its momentum and, in any case, whilst the doomed flight did depart from Charles de Gaulle, there is absolutely no

**"...bodies had been found to have traces of TNT on them..."**

evidence that the bomb was loaded there; the aircraft had stopped at a number of other airports where the device could have been infiltrated on board. That said, it was as recently as December 2015 that 70 employees at the French capital's airports had their security passes revoked in the aftermath of the November 2015 Paris attacks. A decade ago, another 72 Muslim male staff found themselves unable to continue in their employment at Charles de Gaulle airport as they were deemed, by the Anti-terrorist Co-ordination Unit (UCLAT), to represent a vulnerability or danger. The insider threat has, for some time, been deemed to be a real concern in France.

It is highly unlikely that any airlines are going to cease operations to Charles de Gaulle as a result of the loss of MS804, and no European government will put in place the sanctions they did against Egypt after the loss of the Metrojet flight. Such is the nature of international politics and economics. Whilst Egypt has been forced to clean up its act, and its economy suffered hugely as a result, the number of people going through Charles de Gaulle over the Christmas holiday period was similar to previous years.

**"...70 employees at the French capital's airports had their security passes revoked in the aftermath of the November 2015 Paris attacks..."**

But France, and other European states, face an even greater challenge than their Egyptian counterparts. Behind the scenes, there will be considerable pressure to aggressively address the insider threat. All staff will be treated with a degree of suspicion and, like it or not, it will be Muslim employees who will bear the brunt of the clamp down. Those who previously had their passes rescinded have claimed that they were questioned about their degree of religious observance and, for those who were brought up overseas, the schools they had attended. More overtly orthodox employees were reported by their peers more frequently as behaving suspiciously. We cannot, however, allow religious sensitivities to stand in the way of effective security protocols. If the insider threat is alive and well – and it is – our key defence is to better profile our fellow workmates. If that is the route we wish to go down, then we need to better educate them not to make ignorant decisions based on racial or religious stereotypes.

Screening staff, and their belongings, is also essential; the events of the last 16 months have demonstrated that bombs are more likely to make it onto aircraft through the actions of an insider than by a passenger. The technological advances, and the associated deterrent effect, need to have the same security





impact on staff as they do on passengers. And, yet again, I call on the United States not to wait for a terrorist attack perpetrated by an industry insider before it introduces measures to mitigate that vulnerability; demand staff be screened now.

Yet the airline industry, and its regulators, could take one major step towards addressing the insider threat – a step based on traditional screening, with no concerns over accusations of racial profiling: aircraft search. The current checks performed on aircraft prior to their departure are, in the main, cursory and pointless. Flight attendants, if we are lucky, are searching aircraft for a couple of minutes and are not inspecting locations where an insider would conceal a device. Terrorists do not – as in so many videos I have seen – leave IEDs in overhead lockers, seat backs or on the cabin floor; they are more likely to secrete them inside lifejackets, beneath basins, under seat cushions or even in the avionics bay. To find such devices, or even to provide the deterrent effect, involves longer search times and that, in turn, means longer turnaround times. Alternatively, this is where canine units come into their own. Until manufacturers can develop an explosive trace detection system that can screen an aircraft cabin, the aircraft search must become more than the tick-box exercise it currently is.

Aircraft operating higher risk flights could also be X-rayed themselves prior to passenger boarding. Any attendee at last year's AVSEC World in Kuala Lumpur or Airport Security 2016 in London would have had the opportunity to see that the technology does now exist. It is a measure which, at the very least, could be implemented in the event of a specific bomb threat.

**“...flight attendants, if we are lucky, are searching aircraft for a couple of minutes and are not inspecting locations where an insider would conceal a device...”**

We must recognise that the presence of explosive residue, TNT or other, does not confirm the presence of a bomb. Whilst it is now the likely cause, even at the time of the salvage operation, concern was expressed that the aircraft wreckage, its contents and human remains were not being treated as if they were part of a crime scene investigation. Items were hauled out of the water and laid out for viewing on the deck of an Egyptian naval vessel. As a military ship, the decks could easily have been contaminated by explosive residue, as could the hands of the seamen who handled them.

But a bomb was probably responsible and, whilst a suicidal passenger, crewmember or stowaway detonating a device in the toilets or avionics bay are certainly possible scenarios, the insider infiltrating an IED at an airport is clearly our primary concern. Even the fact that the same aircraft, which was operating as MS804 that night had, two years earlier, been daubed with the words “We will bring this plane down” (allegedly in Cairo by political activists not associated with ISIS) illustrates that criminal activity taking place airside at our airports must be addressed more aggressively and effectively. ■

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