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EGYPTAIR FLIGHT MS804:
EXEMPLIFYING THE CHALLENGES, REGARDLESS OF CAUSE

by Philip Baum

It's hard to believe that, two years after the loss of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, another aircraft is missing. On 19 May 2016, EgyptAir flight MS804 was lost en route from Paris to Cairo. At the time of writing, the wreckage has yet to be recovered. Cue: mass speculation as to the cause.

There are two significant differences between MH370 and MS804. Firstly, we know where the wreckage of MS804 is, as it was established on the first day that the aircraft had plunged into the Mediterranean Sea. Within 36 hours, debris was being hauled out of the water by the Egyptian navy. In the case of MH370, only a handful of pieces of the aircraft have been found in 50 months…and they are in five different countries (Reunion, Mozambique, Mauritius, South Africa and, probably, Australia).

Secondly, the routes. A flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing does not immediately cause one to fear terrorism to be the cause, yet when a flight disappears en route from Paris to Cairo, it is hard not to view criminal interference as the most likely scenario at play. France and Egypt are two countries that have already had to deal with mass casualty atrocities perpetrated by the likes of Daesh and al-Qaeda affiliates.

If terrorism was the cause, until the wreckage is recovered it is hard to know what changes need to be made to remedy the fault in the system that enabled the perpetrators to achieve their goal. That said, we should be continuously evaluating our processes and acting on weaknesses even if they had nothing to do with the latest loss. We do not need to wait for disasters to act on proposals which might prevent future tragedies.

The likelihood is that, before the next issue of this journal goes to press, we will know whether MS804 perished as a result of a security incident or a safety-related failure. However, we already know that, from other events occurring around the world, we have to be prepared for an upsurge in terrorist activity. Since 19 May, we have seen suicidal attacks against the police in the heart of the tourist district of Istanbul, an atrocity in a restaurant in Tel Aviv perpetrated by two members of Hamas armed with Carl Gustav (improvised semi-automatic) rifles, 32 people killed by Boko Haram in an assault in Bosso, Niger, 10 people killed by Islamic State in an action in Kazakhstan, and, as this issue was going to press, 50 people massacred at the Pulse LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida by a man claiming to be acting in the name of IS. To make matters worse, the terrorist was a former G4S employee known to have expressed homophobic, anti-Semitic and racist comments.

The incidents are fuelling divisions in western society. In the United Kingdom, with an electorate which normally votes based on the likely financial impact of proposed policies, there is a fair chance that, when it comes to voting 'Remain' or 'Leave' in the forthcoming referendum regarding the UK's membership of the European Union, the strong economic arguments to remain might be ignored due to the climate

"…if the UK opts for a BREXIT and Trump makes it to the White House, the communities already feeling alienated from society are likely to feel even more marginalised…"

of fear created by the migration crisis. In the United States, we are witnessing a presidential campaign in which one of the candidate's utterances are leaving the rest of the world shell-shocked as Trump vilifies an entire community due to the actions of a few.

If the UK opts for a BREXIT and Trump makes it to the White House, the communities already feeling alienated from society are likely to feel even more marginalised. Not exactly the ideal recipe for reducing the likelihood of terrorist attacks.

Let me be clear, I think that our liberal democratic values have prevented us from adopting the necessary security procedures to effectively screen for threats, and to focus on those people who really do pose a threat to our societies. That, however, does not justify penalising entire communities or our failing to act in a humane way by responding to those in need.

If, as I suspect, it emerges that MS804 was the victim of a terrorist attack, the challenge will not only be developing effective countermeasures (which probably should have been implemented long before the aircraft was lost in any case), but also finding a way to better engage with the Muslim community whilst also encouraging people to report concerns about fellow employees. This dilemma was exemplified by Pulse nightclub shooter Omar Mateen's G4S co-worker, Daniel Gilroy, in his interview with the New York Times. "I kind of feel a little guilty that I didn't fight harder. If I didn't walk away and I fought, then maybe 50 people would still be alive today."

Achieving a balanced response, devoid of hatred, and based on risk assessment is not only incumbent upon us all as a security doctrine, but also the only way to uphold the values we wish to protect and our enemies wish to destroy. ■