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SEE IT, SAY IT, SORTED:

OR SEE IT, REPORT IT, BUT ACT IF NECESSARY

by Philip Baum

This is my 138th, and final, lead editorial for *Aviation Security International*. Every two months, aside from those issues which have been published in the immediate aftermath of an atrocity or failed plot, I have tried to conjure up something slightly provocative or a tad controversial to stimulate industry debate. So, what topic should I choose for this final column?

It's been ten months since I have been on an aircraft, or even visited an airport, and my life, like that of so many others has, despite *Zoom* and the online world, become somewhat more insular. Yet I have always argued that we should think outside the box.

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2021 starts with the coronavirus pandemic ravaging the industry, stealing innocent lives and causing lockdowns detrimental to the economy and mental health, so plenty of scope there for comment. Historical events, such as Pan Am 103, are still able to make the news headlines, as we saw this December with the recent charges being brought against Abu Agila Mohammad Masud, the alleged bomb-maker, on the 32nd anniversary of the disaster. A repeat of a 9/11-style

hijacking is clearly still the objective of some as evidenced by the extradition from the Philippines to the US of an alleged al-Shabaab terrorist, Cholo Abdi Abdullah, accused of conspiring to hijack an aircraft and fly it into buildings in the US. Adequate material for a lead editorial.

Al-Shabaab's atrocities plague the African continent and take place with alarming frequency, often escaping the western media's attention, especially given its recent focus on COVID-19, Brexit and a US election that has made the nation the laughing stock of the civilised world. In Somalia, 2021 started in the same way that 2020 ended, with al-Shabaab mortar attacks against aviation interests. IS-sponsored terrorism, and Boko Haram actions, killed thousands of people in Africa last year – from Mozambique to Kenya and from Ethiopia to Nigeria – by suicide bombings, mass public beheadings and summary executions. And 2021 did not start promisingly either with more than 100 people being killed in a simultaneous attack on the villages of Tchombangou and Zaroumdareye in Niger on 2 January. All these groups, and their actions, warrant analysis.

We have almost become immune to actively listening to reports about the number of militants queuing up to die in their suicidal attacks in the Middle East and Africa. Just another bombing or ten. Even when aviation interests are targeted, as they were in Yemen as 2020 drew to a close, in our desperation to resume

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vacation and business travel, we don't truly recognise the significance of these events. Drone attacks against Saudi airfields? Interesting, but not riveting.

Likewise, the litany of unruly passenger incidents caused by selfish individuals claiming that being forced to wear a mask is an infringement of their civil liberties, insider crimes perpetrated for financial gain, airport perimeters breached by intoxicated motorists and sexually depraved acts performed by passengers, crewmembers and officials abusing their positions of power. You can read 'Air Watch'.

No. I have elected to sign off from my editorial duties by responding to the security services' request that, should we see something of concern we should, 'See It. Say It. Sorted'. So, I am. Arguably my greatest concern about aviation security is that, whilst we have the staff and we have the technology, I question whether we truly have the right mindset and defined protocols to respond to the terrorist attacks, which, let's face it, are the prime justification for our security spend.
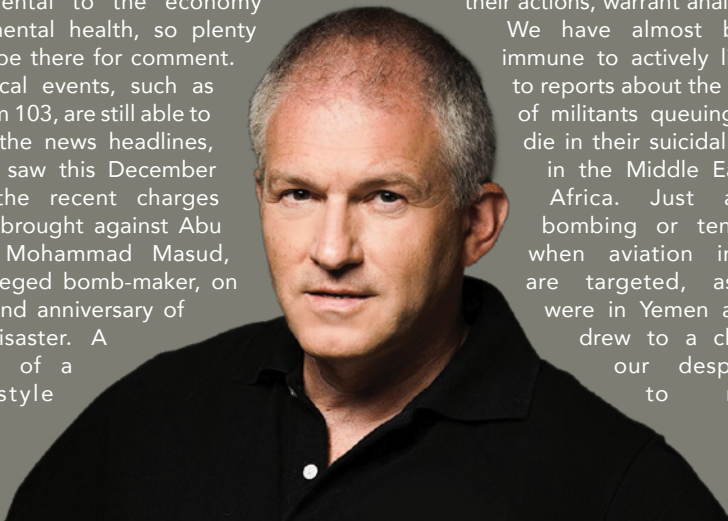
Seemingly alien acts of violence perpetrated in climes distant from the developed world's transportation hubs are very relevant. We didn't respond to the threat of suicidal individuals on board aircraft after the downing of Alas Chiricanas flight 901 in Panama in 1994; we waited for 9/11. We didn't respond to the threat of liquid explosives after the Bojinka Plot, and bombing of Philippine Airlines flight 434 (also in 1994); we waited for flights from the UK to become the target. We didn't respond to the threat of suicidal pilots after LAM Mozambique Airlines flight 470 was intentionally crashed in Namibia by its captain in 2013; we waited for Germanwings in 2015. So, we cannot disregard the fact that suicide bombing and marauding firearms attacks are still a threat to civil aviation worldwide.

Yet how do we respond to the threat? Yes, we have great technology that can detect an ever-increasing range of dangerous explosive compounds and concealed weapons; we have certainly significantly reduced the vulnerability of aircraft being targeted once airborne. And, yes, the industry is finally starting to recognise that behaviour detection ought to be part of the screening process. But how do we respond when we do have concerns? When we 'see it', do we 'say it', and is it 'sorted'?

I always ask my clients wishing to incorporate behavioural analysis into their security regime what they would like their staff to do if they do see something that doesn't seem right. The answer is almost always, "Tell them to report it"! But to who? And does the reporting process simply enter an interminable chain where no individual assumes responsibility or does actually 'sort it'? Does the security operative simply tell their team leader, who tells their supervisor, who tells the duty manager, who tells the airport manager, who may, or may not, call the police controller, who, in turn, then has to find an officer nearby able to respond? And if the subject of concern were that suicide bomber or marauding firearms terrorist, where would they be by then? Waiting patiently to be spoken to?

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We are, of course, dealing with a highly unlikely scenario, but security is there to address the needle in the haystack. 9/11-style hijackers, underpants bombers, shoe bombers and acts of pilot-assisted suicide are not daily occurrences, but they exemplify exactly what we are supposed to prevent.

Every airport should have procedures specifying how security staff should respond if they do believe that they are facing an imminent attack. Of course, reporting concerns is part of that response. But there may be times when that is simply not enough.

Senior managers baulk at the idea of more prescriptive instruction. "We can't expect them to physically engage a suspect. They would claim they are not paid enough to do that." Or, maybe, "We can't have staff taking unauthorised unilateral action that could result in litigation." There will always be excuses, many of them valid, but the reality is that we are simply not training our staff to be able to make educated judgements and cannot, therefore, trust them to respond appropriately. That's irresponsible.

Responses do not have to be physical, although I'd have no objection to security staff being provided with krav maga, or similar, training. Even instruction in basic questioning techniques or evac/invac decision-making would be a step in the right direction. Or simply reminding staff that they can call the police themselves, without entering the in-house reporting chain, if they feel the situation warrants it.

I urge readers to watch the disturbing testimony (available on *YouTube*) of the security staff at the Manchester Arena Inquiry into the suicidal bombing at the Ariana Grande concert in 2017. The bomber, Salman Abedi, was identified by members of the general public as being suspicious. One of them, Christopher Wild, even went to speak to Abedi and asked him what he was doing sitting, with a backpack, out of sight of everyone. Not satisfied with the response, he then reported his concerns to one of the security staff, Mohammad Agha.

Agha had already identified Abedi as being a concern however, he did not have any means to communicate with his seniors (aside from his own mobile phone) and he was reluctant to leave his position to tell anybody. Eventually Agha did manage to relate his own, and Wild's, concerns to another member of staff, Kyle Lawler, who was walking past. Lawler and Agha discussed Abedi and even 'joked' about attacking him if he took out a knife. Lawler's testimony illustrates his fear that, had he taken action and been wrong, he would have been accused of racial profiling.

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Lawler did have the means to radio in his concerns to 'control', as per procedure, but he could not get through. Eventually he left Agha and exited the building and continued with his duties. Wild had 'seen' something and 'said' something, but Abedi remained unchallenged by security; the staff on duty had certainly not sorted it. Abedi detonated his device a few minutes later.

The inquiry also demonstrates the exceptionally scant nature of training afforded the staff and their use of a well-known video used to increase security awareness in the UK – *Eyes Wide Open*. In the video, the examples of concern depicted are resolved by the security staff engaging the suspects in conversation. The staff on duty at the Manchester Arena that night were neither trained to question staff nor even encouraged to engage with suspects. They were to report it. The perils of reliance on generic videos not in keeping with company procedures.

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At present, our airport checkpoints are not exactly chock-a-block with passengers, but once this pandemic is consigned to the history books, they will be. And when they are, throughput rates will, once again, become a key performance indicator. That's all well and good but when a member of staff expresses concern about a given individual, at that moment, security – the very reason we are there – must come first.

If the person causing the concern is sufficiently suspicious, waiting for the response from other members of the team may not be the right option and unilateral action may be more appropriate. Our frontline staff need to be capable first responders. Our screeners need to be effective decision-makers. Our guards need to be empowered and educated to help prevent the atrocities we see taking place around the world occurring at an airport near you.

I've said it. Not sure I've sorted it. That's down to you as, sadly, all I have done is report it one final time. ■

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