

DEAR MR. O'LEARY:

A LETTER FROM AN EXASPERATED PROPONENT OF NON-RACIAL PROFILING

On 22 February 2020, an interview with Ryanair's Chief Executive, Michael O'Leary, appeared in The Times in which he slated current airport security measures and argued that we should focus on young Muslim men as they were more likely to be terrorists. "Who are the bombers? They are going to be single males travelling on their own. If you are travelling with a family of kids, on you go; the chances you are going to blow them all up is f***ing zero. You can't say stuff, because it's racism, but it will generally be males of a Muslim persuasion. Thirty years ago, it was the Irish. If that is where the threat is coming from, deal with the threat."

He is so, so wrong. A robust industry response is required as his argument is ignorant, illogical and incendiary. Worse still, it puts the campaign for embracing behavioural analysis back years as, once again, tactical risk assessment will be interpreted as a licence to racially profile. So, here is my open letter to O'Leary appealing for a more considered approach that addresses the very shortcomings of the current system he clearly recognises.

Dear Mr. O'Leary,

100% support the concept of behavioural analysis. Indeed, I have spent the last 30 years teaching profiling, primarily within the aviation industry. I am even the Chairman of the Behavioural Analysis series of conferences. But behavioural analysis, behaviour detection, tactical risk assessment, passenger profiling, or whatever you call it, must not be based on racial discrimination. Stereotyping Muslim men as terrorists is as insulting as presuming all Thai women are potential prostitutes, Colombian men are drug traffickers and the Irish are stupid!

There are Muslim terrorists, Thai prostitutes, Colombian drug traffickers and even stupid people in Ireland but equally there are terrorists, sex workers, narco-traffickers and those missing a few grey cells in all societies.

According to some media reports, your comments regarding the screening of Muslim passengers were actually made out of frustration with the current approach of screening all passengers the same way without making any attempt to differentiate. If that is so, then I actually share your frustration. No security agency in the world - including customs and immigration agencies who identify people with negative intent every day AFTER they get off an aircraft - blindly treats everybody the same. The security services would not have identified the multitude of plots our society faces were it not for their focus on specific individuals, groups and concerns.

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Michael O'Leary, CEO, Ryanair at WTTC Global Summit 2015
(Credit: World Travel & Tourism Council)

“...can you tell me what a Muslim actually looks like?...”

We place ridiculous faith in technologies, which are incapable of detecting a huge array of substances that could endanger aircraft and those who fly therein. We blindly use terms such as ‘explosive trace detection’ implying that such technology can identify all the different kinds of explosive compounds that a terrorist might use, ignoring the fact that many (perhaps even the majority) of the homemade IEDs used nowadays will simply not alarm if presented at an airport checkpoint. We continue to use metal detection for screening passengers as if they were 1970s hijackers and we have still refused to consider the fact that terrorist plots involving chemical and biological agents are no longer a rarity. Screening in the 2020s is a challenge – almost every prison, high security units which have no concerns about throughput rate, invasion of privacy or customer service, faces the challenge of weapons and drugs which have been infiltrated. So, in comparison, an airport is a piece of cake.

Yes, yes, yes. We need to differentiate. But no, no, no...not on the grounds of race, religion or gender.

Even if the most serious threat aviation faces is from Islamists – and I am not questioning that presumption – asking our screeners to focus on people who look like they are Muslim plays into the very hands of those who espouse that kind of warped ideology. Only 24 hours before your interview appeared in *The Times*, Saffiya Shaikh was sentenced for conspiring to kill herself in a suicidal attack targeting St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. ISIS supporter she may have been, but she was a white, female convert to Islam.

So, Mr. O’Leary, can you tell me what a Muslim actually looks like? If so, please tell. According to a 2017 report by the Henry Jackson Society examining proven cases of Islamist-inspired terrorism between 1998 and 2015, of the 264 individual convictions, plus 5 suicide bombers, 42 were converts. Furthermore, converts to Islam are

reportedly four times more likely to become terrorists than those born into the faith. But you want us to focus on those who look Muslim?

And, Mr. O’Leary, you argue that the problem used to be the IRA, implying that such a threat is no longer present. Yet less than a month before your interview, it was the Continuity Irish Republican Army which was responsible for a plot to mark Brexit day (31 January) by infiltrating a viable IED onto a ferry through Belfast Port. The device had been attached by magnets to the underside of a refrigerated truck bound for Scotland.

“...I hate to think how the many Muslim employees Ryanair has on its payroll must have felt following your interview. They fly, serve, service, load, fuel and clean your aircraft. And yet you have further vilified a community that is struggling with its links to Islamists...”

Thank goodness, the security services were not focussing all their attention on the Muslim community. But for you, aviation is immune to such threats?

According to Europol’s 2019 report, in 2018 there were a total of 129 foiled, failed and completed terrorist attacks reported by nine European Union member states. But the largest number of attacks – 83 to be precise – in which a terrorist affiliation could be identified were actually carried out by ethno-nationalist and separatist extremists, not Islamists. In fact, the number of Islamist attacks decreased from 33 in 2017 to 24 in 2018. I will, however, grant you that Islamist attacks were responsible for the vast majority of the fatalities.

Israel learned, at significant cost, the perils of adopting a racial profiling system. On 30 May 1972, three members of the Japanese Red Army arrived at Tel Aviv’s Lod Airport on board an Air France flight. They retrieved their unscreened luggage at baggage carousel, opened them up, withdrew their firearms and commenced a massacre which resulted in the deaths of 26 Puerto Rican pilgrims who had just arrived to visit the Holy Land. Nobody had noticed these Japanese visitors because, whilst there were security



guards in the arrivals hall, they were focussed on those of Arabic appearance. Roll on 14 years and the Israeli profiling system identified Anne-Marie Murphy at Heathrow Airport; the white, pregnant, Catholic woman had been duped by her 'boyfriend' into carrying a bomb onto the flight. She didn't fit the stereotypical image of a terrorist. Then again, Mr O'Leary, she was Irish!

The hurdles we make passengers jump before boarding their flights are not solely designed to identify the terrorist threat. It is a process that is supposed to prevent any act of unlawful interference with civil aviation and, ideally, to detect a host of other criminal activities, which may take place at airports or on aircraft.

There are too many attacks – if you wish to stereotype, usually perpetrated by angry white men – which have had high death tolls that have had nothing to do with Islamist-inspired terrorism. Think of Martin Bryant in Tasmania, Anders Behring Breivik in Otøya, Stephen Paddock in Las Vegas, Brenton Tarrant in Christchurch or, even this year, Sgt. Maj. Jakapanth Thomma in Thailand or the so-called incel, Tobias Rathjen, in Hanau whose very target was the Muslim

community. No, aviation was not the target of these attacks, but they could have been.

We transport and employ many people with underlying psychological problems that our checkpoints are supposed to identify. You are quite correct that for too long we have adopted a tick-box approach to security – the liquids, aerosols and gels restrictions exemplifying this – and for too long we have abandoned common sense in favour of political correctness. All we do is end up focussing on the search for prohibited or restricted items and we ignore intent. You are correct that we need a more intelligent system where our screeners have no qualms stopping somebody because of their behaviour and, yes, they should even consider that person's age, gender, nationality and ethnicity. To ignore such criteria would be equally short-sighted. That, however, is very different to asking screeners by definition to focus on a specific group or, worse still, ignore or exempt anybody because they are a little old lady or "a family of kids". They too can be duped, perhaps easily so.

I hate to think how the many Muslim employees Ryanair has on its payroll must have felt following your interview.

"...less than a month before your interview, it was the Continuity IRA which was responsible for a plot to mark Brexit day by infiltrating a viable IED onto a ferry through Belfast Port..."

They fly, serve, service, load, fuel and clean your aircraft. And yet you have further vilified a community that is struggling with its links to Islamists who wish to target our values. We need to work with the Muslim community to combat radicalisation rather than further fan the flames of xenophobia. And, whilst you may not fly there, I hate to think what industry colleagues of yours at Middle Eastern carriers must have thought, let alone your own security department who have to manage the risk to Ryanair.

These are difficult days for aviation. The current Covid-19 pandemic is likely to result, not only in a downturn in passenger numbers, but in a host of economically-inspired cuts for those airlines who survive. Training and security are often first in line for the axe, or at least, severe trimming. Against that background, I think it is unlikely that we will see real innovation in the short-term. But I hope that we do, sooner rather than later, embrace the spirit of your comments – to differentiate – rather than the substance. If so, Mr. O'Leary, the current negativity surrounding your comments could be turned into something very positive for the entire industry.

Yours sincerely,
Philip Baum

