

BY JOSH WOOD



STAY CALM AND NO ONE GETS HURT

Leila Khaled is one of the reasons why you have to take your shoes off at airports. Her looks pushed a British rock band to write a love song about her. She **was the first woman to hijack a plane**, and she's very sorry if she caused any discomfort for the passengers onboard

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**HORTLY AFTER TAKE-OFF
ON SEPTEMBER 6, 1970,**

26-year-old Leila Khaled — a passenger on El Al flight 217 from Amsterdam to New York — rose from her seat, removed the pin from a grenade she was carrying with her teeth, and announced that the plane was being hijacked.

“The minute we stood up, there was shooting from the Israeli sky marshals,” she tells me from the living room of her west Amman home.

Khaled, an operative for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), had just begun her second hijacking attempt. She, along with American-born Nicaraguan, Patrick Arguello, were to commandeer the Boeing 707 as part of the PFLP’s attempt to simultaneously hijack planes around the globe. Their aim was to bring the world’s attention to the Palestinian cause.

The PFLP had originally planned for four operatives to be on flight 217 — well aware that the Israeli airliner would have armed security on board. But the other two members were unable to board, having been told there were no more seats on the plane. This left Arguello (armed with a pistol and a grenade) and Khaled (with two grenades stuffed in her pockets) to fend for themselves.

When they stood up, Arguello was quickly shot and slumped to the floor. This was a shocking derailment of the plan. Khaled and Arguello hadn’t expected the sky marshals to open fire — a stray bullet could easily pierce the fuselage of the plane, putting the lives of everyone onboard at risk. “After he fell down, an officer came and shot him with four more bullets. Another one came with a bottle of whiskey — or maybe it was wine — and broke it over his head,” she says, taking another drag on a British Rothmans cigarette.

It wasn’t enough to stop Khaled. Running to the cockpit, she banged on the locked and reinforced door, vowing to blow up the plane if the crew did not comply. Then she too was hit over the head with a blunt object and passed out, still clutching the unexploded grenade in her hand. When Khaled awoke, the plane had made an emergency landing in London where she was taken into British custody, much to the chagrin of the Israelis who had captured her. Her comrade was already dead.



THE PICTURE OF LEILA KHALED TAKEN IN 1970,

her head wrapped loosely in a kaffiyeh, smiling coyly as she cradles her Kalashnikov, has an iconic appeal. It’s the juxtaposition of youthful, feminine beauty with an instrument of death that evokes the intrigue. On her slender finger she wears a ring, made from the twisted pin of a grenade holding a bullet in place to her flesh, and she exudes a revolutionary calm, the type you see in posters of Che Guevara.

At first, it’s hard to see the resemblance between that image and the woman sitting before me today. Time has inevitably taken its toll and she’s shorter than I would have imagined. She’s also swapped her kaffiyeh and army fatigues for a civilian wardrobe in the forty years since the photo was taken. Neither does her living room look much like the quarters of a militant: the walls and sideboards are decorated with pictures of her family and a small dog barks from the next room. Her house, located in a quiet, residential neighbourhood, isn’t luxurious, but she is obviously comfortable.

A maid brings us mint tea as we talk, and we’re sitting on stiff couches with gilded armrests; the sort that are popular among upper-middle class residences in this part of the world.

“Resistance is not just in one path: resistance is a lifestyle,” she says, leaving no doubt that she is still the same person despite her middle-aged looks and the not-so-militant environs. As we talk, I begin to see the small things around the house that resurrect Khaled’s past: a sticker of PFLP ideologue, Ghassan Kanafani (also a respected author who died in a Beirut car bomb in 1972); the framed picture of PFLP founder, George Habbash, that sits next to a coffee table.

In 1969, Khaled became the world’s first woman to hijack an airplane and she quickly became the poster girl of Palestinian militancy. She was an anomaly and an enigma: a woman taking part in one of the most terrifying acts one can carry out. At the same time, her feminine side shone through. She swears she never had any intention of hurting anyone and says she only wanted to make a point. It was these sharp contrasts that would captivate the world soon after she hijacked her first plane. Her iconic image prompted 1980s alternative British rockers, The Teardrop Explodes, to release a song entitled “Like Leila Khaled Said”, and she was the inspiration behind Leela, a character on British sci-fi show *Dr. Who*.

Khaled was born in 1944 in the Palestinian city of Haifa, now in present-day Israel. In 1948, during al-Nakba (the catastrophe), she, along with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, were pushed out of the land. Her next-door neighbour in Haifa was a Jewish girl named Tamara. When Khaled’s mother told her children that they must flee north, Khaled says, “I asked my mother, ‘Is Tamara coming?’ She replied, ‘No’. I said, ‘Then I don’t want to go.’”

The family settled in the Lebanese city of Tyre, less than twenty kilometres from the Israeli border. Life in Lebanon wasn’t easy — they had been relatively affluent in Palestine, but in Tyre they had next to nothing. “I never had a pencil; we always had half a pencil. My mother would cut them in two,” she says. “The question we would ask our parents was, ‘Why?’, and the answer was always the same: ‘Because you are out of Palestine.’ That created the idea in our minds that everything we needed was in Palestine.”

Khaled was pushed strongly towards politics. As a child, she took part in Palestinian demonstrations marking al-Nakba and the Balfour Declaration. She tried to join the Arab National Movement, but was told she was too young. Finally, at the age of sixteen, she was allowed in and soon began her first round of military training while at university. She joined the PFLP some years later, while working as a teacher in Kuwait in the late 1960s. After moving to Jordan in 1969 to receive further military training, she was selected for her first hijacking mission. The reason she was chosen, she suspects, was this: “I was very committed and good at fighting.”

Waiting to board TWA flight 840 from Rome to Athens on August 29, 1969, the then rookie hijacker Khaled says she wasn’t nervous. **“I felt honoured to be nominated for such an assignment,”** she tells me. Unlike her second hijacking attempt a year later, this operation — carried out with fellow PFLP member Salim Issawi — would go smoothly. “It was very clean because the minute we hijacked the plane, we announced our goals,” she remembers. “We had strict instructions not to hurt anybody and we didn’t.”

Brandishing grenades, they forced the pilots to fly across the Mediterranean to the homeland she could barely remember. “You might say we caused panic — I know that. We apologised to the people; we told them they were not the ones intended in the hijacking, but that we had to explain why we were doing this and tell them our story.”

As the plane entered Israeli airspace, it was flanked by fighter jets, threatening the plane not to land. Khaled told the captain to fly over Haifa, which she had not seen for over two decades. "I said to them, 'This is our city; my comrade Salim and myself are from Haifa. We are not allowed to go back to our country, to our city.'"

After flying over Israel, Khaled ordered the plane to be flown to Syria. Upon arriving at Damascus International Airport, the plane was emptied of its passengers before the militants blew up the cockpit. Leila Khaled had just become a household name in the Middle East and a terrorist in the eyes of much of the world.

THE SECOND TIME AROUND, PROBLEMS BEGAN TO ARISE AT THE AIRPORT IN AMSTERDAM.

Khaled was travelling on a Honduran passport. Within the past year she had undergone multiple plastic surgeries to her nose and chin so that she could continue operations and hopefully evade assassination. In the terminal, an Israeli security officer confronted Khaled and Arguello and asked to search their bags. "When he asked us to go to search our luggage I said, 'You can check them.' He refused, so as we were walking towards the bags so I could open them, he asked, 'Do you speak Spanish?' and I replied, 'Si, señor.'"

It was the only Spanish she spoke, but it was enough to placate the officer. While the Israelis searched the bags, they failed to pat-down Khaled or Arguello, both of whom were carrying weapons.

Hours later, after the attempt failed, Khaled found herself in British custody. She was taken to a London police station and thrown in a cell. "For six days, I didn't speak to anybody," Khaled tells me. She says she was distraught at the death of her colleague and the failure of their mission. The only upside to the whole episode was that the Israelis hadn't succeeded in taking her back to Israel, where she could have counted on decades behind bars.

On September 9, 1970 – just three days after Khaled's failed attempt – a PFLP sympathiser hijacked BOAC flight 775 from Bahrain to push for Khaled's release. The plane joined two others in Jordan, hijacked by the PFLP in the same plot that Khaled's failed El Al attempt had been a part of. With three aircraft on the tarmac in Jordan's remote eastern desert, the PFLP staged a press conference before detonating explosives aboard the planes, which had been emptied of their passengers.

The pressure worked. A deal to release Khaled was reached three weeks after she was taken into custody. While being detained after both operations, she never once faced a judge.

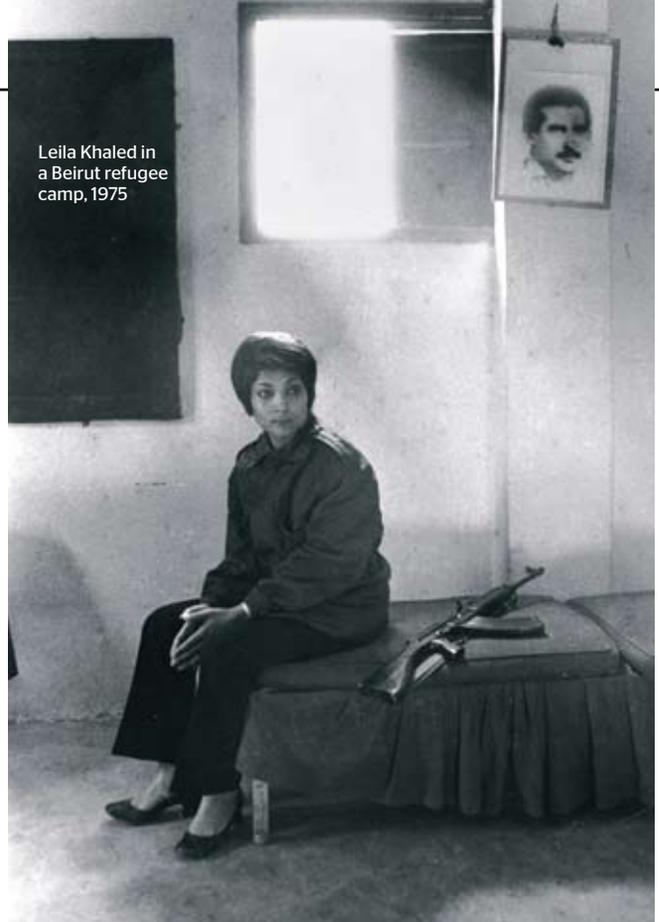
SHE CRIED WHEN AMERICAN PRESIDENT JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY WAS ASSASSINATED IN DALLAS, Texas in 1963. Despite being overwhelmingly

against past and present U. S. foreign policy, the events shocked and moved her. "When I saw his children I was very sympathetic towards them," she says.

The circumstances of the president's death further upset her. "We are against assassination; it is unethical," she tells me. "Palestinians suffered from them too much. We know very well the pain of his family and his people."

While much of the West and Israel consider Khaled's actions to be the work of a terrorist, she maintains that it was nothing of the sort, instead defending her actions as both ethical and necessary. "The hijackings were tactics to release prisoners from Israeli jails," she says. "We had to ring a bell to the whole world that we Palestinians are not only refugees, but that our land is occupied.

Leila Khaled in a Beirut refugee camp, 1975



I think by using such tactics, the whole world heard and began to ask questions like, 'Why are those people doing that? Who are they?'"

She acknowledges that the strategy used by the PFLP was controversial, but in the end feels that the operations were carried out for the greater good.

While Khaled talks about her actions relatively nonchalantly, it's not as if they didn't have their repercussions. The three planes hijacked in September 1970 were all diverted to Jordan's Dawson's Field (which would briefly come to be known as "Revolutionary Airport") near the city of Zarqa. This called the attention of the world to the Palestinian militants and showed that they were running a state within a state in Jordan. For the Jordanian government – which was struggling to keep control of its sovereignty – this was one of the final straws. They would mount an all-out offensive on Palestinian guerrillas operating in the kingdom in what became known as Black September. With a large Palestinian population in Jordan – estimated at over sixty percent of the population of the country today – the civil war would tear the fabric of the country at its seams. After much bloodshed and the intervention of Syria (on the side of the Palestinians) and even Pakistan (on the side of the Jordanians), the hostilities ended with the Jordanian government on top and Palestinian rebels forced into nearby Lebanon.

What little central authority the Lebanese possessed quickly eroded as a result. Palestinian guerrillas established another state within a state in the southern part of the country during the early 1970s. Launching border raids and attacks against the Israelis, the Palestinians lost popularity with many Lebanese in light of the inevitable Israeli reprisals. While the Palestinian military presence in Lebanon alone cannot be pointed to as the cause of the country's fifteen-year-long civil war, it worked as a catalyst for already growing tensions in the country and would play a significant role in much of the fighting.

Today, with the shadow of 9/11 still looming large, hijackings have taken a much more sinister hue. To some, Leila Khaled is viewed in the same light as a member of al-Qaeda would be – a terrorist with no remorse. Others see her as a principled freedom fighter and an ardent feminist, one of the boldest resistance figures the Palestinians have known.

To talk with her, you could be forgiven for concluding that the latter opinion is closer to the truth. She is undoubtedly driven by concrete beliefs stemming from her oppression. **Khaled does not seem lustful for blood and when she says she didn't intend to hurt anybody, it seems believable.** On the El Al flight, as the Israeli security personnel began shooting up the plane, she tells me that she could have quite easily detonated one of her grenades, blowing a gash in the plane that would almost certainly led to the death of everybody onboard. As far as she knew at the time, she was facing her own death. But she didn't do it. She speaks in well-balanced, seemingly logical words, even if they are occasionally laced with her party's rhetoric. These are not the words of a psychopath.

Since the hijackings, she's suffered repercussions. While living in Beirut back in 1970, a house she was visiting with a PFLP leader came under rocket fire from the Israelis, in what she says was an assassination attempt. Despite some trips to Europe since the hijackings, she is now denied most visas upon request, meaning she can't visit the country where her favourite cigarettes are produced.

The rest of us face a daily reminder of her actions when we remove our shoes, belts and place liquids and gels in plastic ziplock bags at airport security. The PFLP, in a way, made hijackings hip – and the world is still paying the price for that.

IT'S FORTY YEARS SINCE LEILA KHALID LAST CARRIED GRENADES ONTO A PLANE and she has long since laid down her rifle. While the PFLP – along with most other Palestinian political and militant organisations – was banned in Jordan after 1970's Black September events, Khaled continues to work with the much more benign Palestinian National Council in Amman as an outspoken politician. Speaking engagements around the region (and further afield before no-fly lists came into play) take up the rest of her time.

Her life no longer captures the attention of the world, but for Khaled it is still an integral part of the cause. The present-day struggles reflect the shifting dynamics of tactics used by the Palestinian resistance. And despite the much calmer lifestyle she now enjoys, Khaled still has the ability to occasionally stir controversy with her words. In April, the Bethlehem-based news organisation Ma'an reported that Khaled called for the dismantling of the Palestinian Authority (the organisation established in 1994 to govern parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip), citing it as divisive and harmful to the Palestinian cause.

For Khaled, the life of resistance has been a long, and so far unsuccessful, struggle. Nonetheless, she remains optimistic that she will see Haifa once again – the birthplace she last saw forty years ago, whilst craning her neck towards the hijacked TWA flight's cockpit window. Hope, she insists, is a necessary element of the resistance, despite how bleak the odds might currently seem.

In a world where the word hijacking has become synonymous with terrorism, Khaled denies that she is or ever was a terrorist. "Occupation is the implementation of terrorism," she says of the Israeli seizure of the hometown she may never live to see again. **E**



BOAC Flight 775, from Bombay to London via Bahrain and Beirut, lies mangled on the runway at Dawson's Field

TIMELINE

1944: Leila Khaled born in Haifa, Palestine.

1948: Al-Nakba, "The Catastrophe", occurs. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians expelled from their homes, including Khaled and her family.

1967: The Six-Day War between Israel and surrounding Arab states results in a defeat for the Arabs and an expansion of Israel. Palestinians begin to stop putting their faith in friendly governments and instead support their own militias and paramilitary organisations. Khaled soon joins the PFLP.

August 29, 1969: Khaled hijacks TWA Flight 840 from Rome to Athens. The flight is diverted to Damascus, where she is detained and soon released.

1969-1970: Khaled undergoes numerous plastic surgery operations to change her appearance so that she can again take part in militant activities.

September 6, 1970: Khaled and Patrick Arguello attempt to hijack El Al flight 217 from Amsterdam to New York. The attempt fails, with Khaled knocked unconscious and Arguello killed by sky marshals. Khaled is arrested by British police upon diversion of the plane to London. Despite the failure, the PFLP hijack three planes on this day.

September 9, 1970: PFLP sympathisers hijack BOAC flight 775, leaving Bahrain to demand Khaled's release from custody. The plane is taken to Dawson's Field in Jordan, where it joins two other hijacked aircraft.

September 15, 1970: Jordan's King Hussein declares martial law. Military forces attack Palestinian paramilitary groups based in Jordan as part of "Black September". The PLO and other Palestinian groups are eventually forced to evacuate Jordan for Lebanon.

October 1, 1970: Khaled released from British custody in a prisoner swap.

September 5-6 1972: Members of the group Black September – taking its name from the events in Jordan two years earlier – kill eleven Israeli athletes at the Olympic Games in Munich, Germany.

1973: Surprise attack by Egypt and Syria against Israel results in another Arab-Israeli war and another defeat for the Arabs.

1975: Lebanese civil war begins. Palestinian militant groups, expelled from Jordan five years earlier, are some of the main combatants in the long-running dispute.

Leila Khaled talks to the press during a tour of a former Israeli prison in the southern Lebanese village of Khiam on January 24, 2009

