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Palestine: 'I made the ring from a bullet and the pin of a hand grenade'

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When Palestinian liberation fighter Leila Khaled hijacked her first plane in 1969, she became the international pin-up of armed struggle. Then she underwent cosmetic surgery so she could do it again. Thirty years on, she talks to Katharine Viner about being a woman at war

In a way, the whole story is in the ring. The iconic photograph of Leila Khaled, the picture which made her the symbol of Palestinian resistance and female power, is extraordinary in many ways: the gun held in fragile hands, the shiny hair wrapped in a keffiyeh, the delicate Audrey Hepburn face refusing to meet your eye. But it's the ring, resting delicately on her third finger. To fuse an object of feminine adornment, of frivolity, with a bullet: that is Khaled's story, the reason behind her image's enduring power. Beauty mixed with violence.

And the ring? "I made it from the pin of a hand grenade - from the first grenade I ever used in training," she says. "I just wrapped it around a bullet."

Leila Khaled - international hijacker for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the papers' favourite 70s "girl terrorist" and "deadly beauty" - is now 57, and sitting with me in the House of Commons for her first ever interview on British soil. Her cheekbones are still like knives; her eyes are gentle but flicker when moved. She has a Rothmans cigarette constantly dangling languorously between her fingers (she once said of a potentially boring time in Kuwait: "I was politically conscious and a chain smoker - I needed no other diversions").

She is, of course, wearing a keffiyeh, fringed with wool in the Palestinian colours of red, green, black and white, like a shawl. But she looks very different now from the way she did in that famous photo, and not just because of age. Since that picture was taken in 1969, after her first (successful) hijack of a TWA plane, Khaled underwent no fewer than six cosmetic operations on her face, so that no one would ever recognise her again. She refused to wander around with the face of an icon.

"The surgeon just made a few differences to my nose and my chin," she says. "But it worked. No one recognised me." She elected to have surgery without a general anaesthetic; because, as she said in her autobiography: "I have a cause higher and nobler than my own, a cause to which all private interests and concerns must be subordinated."

Such revolutionary-speak is a reminder that Khaled is from a very different time: an age when hijacks were a political tool of the moment, when commitment, extreme risk and sacrifice were admired and often romanticised. Her sexuality was always emphasised; as recently as 1980, a Norwegian newspaper made jokes about her "bombs" (Norwegian slang for breasts) and she is supposed to have been the inspiration for Leela, Dr Who's foxy sidekick in 1975.

She is the pin-up of armed struggle; like her hero, Che Guevara, Khaled had the glamour as well as

the belief. She had a certain disdain for her fellow western revolutionaries, however: "We found it very amusing that they honestly believed they were making a 'revolution' if they undressed in public, seized a university building, or shouted an obscenity at bureaucrats," she says.

The surgery meant that Khaled was able to undertake her second hijack without detection; this time of an El Al jet from Amsterdam. "At Amsterdam airport my comrade Patrick [Arguello, a Nicaraguan] and I were stopped by Israeli officers," she says. "They searched our bags very thoroughly, but they didn't find anything in there. Because the grenades were in my pockets." She takes a deep breath. "We had passports from Honduras. The officer said to me, 'do you speak Spanish?' At once I said, 'Si señor' - I was lucky, because they were the only words I knew."

In mid-flight, Khaled and Arguello tried to storm the cockpit. They banged on the door; Khaled took the pins out of her grenades with her teeth and ordered the captain to let them in. But there were armed guards on the plane and they began to shoot. "Patrick was shot in the back four times, and another man came with a bottle of whisky and banged it over his head," says Khaled. "It was terrible." Why didn't they shoot her? "I had grenades," she says, with a shrug of her shoulders. "Eventually I was hit on the back of my head, and I lost consciousness. When I woke up I was tied up and being kicked." Passengers were shouting; I heard a woman scream, 'Stop the bloodshed'. But we had very strict instructions: don't hurt the passengers. Only defend yourselves. "But the grenades would have hurt the passengers, had she released them." I did not want to blow up the plane," she says, sternly. "It was only to threaten." (While the PFLP was involved in other controversial armed actions in Israel, including some which led to the deaths of civilians, no one died during either of the hijacks in which Khaled was involved.

The plane landed at Heathrow and Khaled was taken to Ealing police station where she was held for 28 days, until the then prime minister, Edward Heath, released her in exchange for western hostages held by the PFLP. Her stay in Britain was pleasant, she says. "People were very nice. They would say to each other: is she the one? They could hardly believe it, this tiny creature sitting on the bench. I was 26 and I was very thin. I had two policewomen with me in my cell, and we were always discussing our cause and our suffering. After I left I sent them books about Palestine; they asked me to. We wrote to each other. One of them had a problem with her boyfriend, and we often discussed this."

It's an intriguing thought: the Palestinian revolutionary and the Ealing policewoman finding common ground by discussing men.

Although it is not, perhaps, so surprising. Women have always related to Khaled. As Eileen Macdonald, in her book *Shoot the Women First*, puts it: "She shattered a million and one taboos overnight and she revolutionised the thinking of hundreds of other angry young women around the world."

She flamboyantly overcame the patriarchal restrictions of Arab society where women are traditionally subservient to their husbands, by taking an equal fighting role with men, by getting divorced and remarried, having children in her late 30s, and rejecting vanity by having her face reconstructed for her cause.

There were difficulties with being both a woman and a fighter, however. "In the beginning, all women had to prove that we could be equal to men in armed struggle," says Khaled. "So we wanted to be like men - even in our appearance." Robin Morgan, in her book, *The Demon Lover: The Sexuality of Terrorism*, writes about how Khaled lost out in two ways.

The men in her organisation resented the attention she got, while women were frustrated that she

never spoke about women, only about the revolution. (She once said, "I represent Palestinians, not women.") This has echoes of something Mairead Farrell, the IRA volunteer who was shot dead by the SAS in Gibraltar in 1988, once said: "I'm oppressed as a woman, but I'm also oppressed because I'm Irish ... We can't successfully end our oppression as women until we first end the oppression of our country."

But things seem to have changed for Khaled. "I no longer think it's necessary to prove ourselves as women by imitating men," she says. "I have learned that a woman can be a fighter, a freedom fighter, a political activist, and that she can fall in love, and be loved, she can be married, have children, be a mother." "You see, at the beginning we were only interested in the revolution. We were not mature enough politically. The question of women is a part of our struggle but not the only part. Revolution must mean life also; every aspect of life." "Is she a Palestinian first, or a woman first?" "I cannot differentiate," she says. "A woman and a Palestinian at the same time."

Khaled was born in Haifa, now on the Israeli coast, but became a refugee with her family at a camp in Tyre, Lebanon, as a toddler in 1948. (During her 1969 hijacking of the TWA flight she forced the pilot to fly over Haifa, so that she could look at the home town she was not permitted to visit.) She can barely recall a time when she was not politicised: she remembers at the age of four being told by her mother not to pick oranges because they were in Lebanon; the fruit was not theirs, they were not in Haifa now. She committed herself full-time to armed struggle at the age of 15.

Since the time of the hijacks, Khaled has lived in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, and has brought up two sons who are now 18 and 15. She continued her activism, first as a fighter and then as a politician for the PFLP as a member of the Palestinian National Council. (Her sons offer to be her bodyguards and when they were small really did say: "Tell us stories about the struggle, mum.")

But she is still as radical as ever. "The struggle of the Palestinians has taken many faces. Armed struggle, intifada, and now both. Which means as long as there is occupation in our country, the conflict will continue." She demands the right to self-determination, a state with Jerusalem as its capital, the right to return for refugees and the withdrawal of Israel from all the land it has occupied since 1967. "Otherwise the purpose for conflict will always be there." And now? "Now people are fed up. They are saying: now and forever. Let's do it. This time."

What she says can be difficult for peaceniks, or pacifists, to hear - the unashamed justification for violence. Many ordinary Palestinians share her views, many politicians do not. Similarly, views on Khaled herself are mixed, even among Palestinians: some think she is an inspiring heroine, others believe she reinforces the old 70s image of Palestinians as terrorists.

Is she a terrorist? "Whenever I hear this word I ask another question," she says. "Who planted terrorism in our area? Some came and took our land, forced us to leave, forced us to live in camps. I think this is terrorism. Using means to resist this terrorism and stop its effects - this is called struggle." She recalls in her memoirs thinking of the risk to children she saw on the plane she was hijacking, and telling herself: "We Palestinians are children too and we are a part of the human race."

Would she still die for the Palestinian cause? She draws on her long cigarette, and turns to face me after some silence. "Of course." She shakes her head, smiling, cigarette burning in her hand. "Of course."

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