

Weak words from Ottawa fit a pattern

KESSEL

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She spoke about the safety of "air passengers," said she was relieved that everyone was safe and commended the "swift action and courage of those on board."

All true. But something was missing. The word "attack" was missing. So were "stabbing," "hijacking," "terrorism," "Israelis" and, most strikingly, "Jews."

An apparent attempt to take control of a passenger aircraft and potentially bring it down is not simply an "incident." The United Arab Emirates has launched an investigation into whether the episode was linked to "terrorist activity or intent."

A substantial part of my career involved International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)-related issues. More recently, I was involved in Canada's response to the destruction of Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752 by Iran over Tehran.

All 176 people aboard were killed, including 55 Canadian citizens and 30 Canadian permanent residents. Canada has pursued accountability for PS752 victims through international legal and diplomatic channels, including at the ICAO and the International Court of Justice.

Words matter in these cases. They matter because they describe what happened, identify who was responsible and, ultimately, help determine what accountability should look like. That is why Anand's statement is so troubling.

The Flydubai flight was carrying a large majority of Israeli passengers. The U.A.E. is investigating possible terrorist intent, while Israeli officials have said there is evidence pointing to Islamist radicalization and a possible motive to kill Jews. If the investigation establishes that the passengers were targeted because they were Israeli or Jewish, their identity will not be some incidental detail.

And yet Canada's foreign minister managed to describe the event without mentioning the Israeli passengers or Jews. This is not simply about one poorly chosen word. It fits an increasingly familiar pattern.

The federal government tells Jewish-Canadians that it

takes antisemitism seriously. We have government strategies, special envoys, parliamentary statements and repeated declarations about the threat of Jew-hatred.

But the real test is what the government says when Jews are actually the intended victims of violence.

And there is an important distinction here. Criticism of Israel is legitimate. Criticism of the Israeli government is legitimate. But that distinction cannot become an excuse for failing to recognize antisemitism when it is staring us in the face.

If someone attacks Israelis because they are Israelis, that is anti-Israel hatred. And if the evidence establishes that Jews were targeted because they were Jews, it is antisemitism. The Canadian government should be able to make that distinction without hesitation.

There was also something deeply human about what happened aboard Flight 1073 that should not be lost. An Indian pilot was attacked. Israeli passengers intervened. Other crew members and pilots helped take control of the aircraft.

People from different countries acted to save one another. That is the story our foreign minister could have told. Instead, we got a diluted, bureaucratic, generic statement: "The safety of air passengers is a fundamental principle of international aviation and ICAO."

Of course it is. But people were not saved by a principle. They were saved by other people.

Machchhar deserves to be named. The passengers who intervened deserve to be recognized. And the Israeli passengers should not disappear into the anonymous category of "air passengers."

Call an attack an attack. Call antisemitism antisemitism. And when Jews are the intended targets, have the courage to say so.

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There was more to Minister of Foreign Affairs Anita Anand's diluted comments about the near-tragedy aboard Flydubai Flight 1073 than poor word choice, Alan Kessel says.