

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: THE SEIZURE OF THE ACHILLE LAURO

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In what appears to be an emerging tactic, terrorists again have sought to embroil international powers in their parochial battles by seizing an Italian luxury liner. Equally unprecedented was the U.S. response of intercepting an Egyptian plane carrying the hijackers to freedom and forcing it to land in Italy, where justice could be meted out. The question is whether the U.S. decision to act will compel terrorists to reconsider their new tactic or incite them to commit even more daring attacks.

The similarities between the latest incident and the hijacking of a TWA airliner in June are striking. The terrorists' ostensible target was Israel; their weapon, the lives of innocent vacationers from other countries; their purpose, to coerce other governments to put pressure on Israel to release prisoners; and their motivation, to gain an advantage over rival Mideast terrorist groups.

Hatred of Israel, long a unifying force among otherwise contentious terrorist organizations, has become the lightning rod in their struggle for preeminence in the Middle East. The aphorism that "crime doesn't pay" doesn't seem to apply to terrorism. Using it as a tool, obscure, relatively small and powerless groups have catapulted themselves to fame and power.

Success need not be a determining factor in this strategy; survival is a form of winning. The willingness to act, as well as the ability to coerce and embarrass world powers, is often enough to ensure if not the ascendance, then at least the existence, of an otherwise marginal group. It happened to previously unheard of groups like *Hezbollah* and Islamic Jihad in Lebanon. Now the spotlight appears to be on the Palestine Liberation Front.

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At the root of the TWA hijacking was the internal power struggle for control of the Shi'a movement in Lebanon. The terrorists who seized the plane allegedly belonged to *Hezbollah*, a shadowy faction of the mainstream Shi'a organization, *Amal*. They sought to bring American pressure on Israel to release 700 Shi'a militiamen held in Israeli jails. An ulterior, but equally important, motive was their desire to check the ascendance of *Amal* and its leader, Nabih Berri, and secure for themselves the prestige and stature that would accompany the freeing of their comrades.

The pirating of the *Achille Lauro* may have been an attempt to use the same tactic in order to achieve a similar internal goal. The four terrorists involved in the incident reportedly are members of the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF)--a dissident offshoot of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Seizing a ship carrying West Germans, Italians, Britons and Americans internationalized their demand that 50 Palestinians held in Israeli jails be freed. At the same time, the Palestinians may also have hoped to tarnish the influence of PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat and thus thwart his efforts to obtain a negotiated settlement of the Palestine question.

The similarities between the two terrorist acts do not stop here. Much as Nabih Berri was hailed for resolving the hijacking crisis, Arafat is now receiving praise for his role in negotiating the surrender of the Palestinians who held the *Achille Lauro*. Both men turned threats to their leadership into personal victories, despite suspicions that each was somehow involved in orchestrating the crises.

In recent months, Arafat has sought to consolidate his position as head of the PLO. He has allied himself with Jordan's King Hussein and has even considered recognizing Israel's right to exist as part of a Jordanian-Palestinian initiative to open a dialogue with the United States. In this respect, Arafat has maneuvered to trade recognition of Israel for the establishment of a Palestinian state (confederated with Jordan) on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Such a settlement is anathema to the so-called "rejectionist" factions within the PLO who seek the destruction of Israel as a prerequisite to the re-establishment of the Palestinian homeland.

The latest round of PLO infighting began after the long-delayed 17th session of the Palestine National Council (which functions as a Palestinian parliament-in-exile) in Amman last November. Although Arafat obtained a significant victory simply by holding the congress despite efforts of PLO "rejectionists" to prevent it, his overall accomplishments were more symbolic than real. For example, the formal endorsement of Arafat's continued leadership lacked credibility since dissident members refused to attend. Moreover, this procedural victory was followed by the Council's general approval of the PLO-Jordanian peace efforts. Renewed fratricidal violence soon flared. Within weeks, two Arafat loyalists were gunned down and an attempt made on a third. The killings left no doubt that Arafat's manipulation of the National Council and his disregard of dissidents would not be tolerated.

Six weeks ago, in Tunis, the PLO Executive Committee, a ten-man inner cabinet, issued a call for an international Middle East peace conference (under United Nations auspices) and discussed United States offers to meet with a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. That same day, the first of three murders of Arafat loyalists occurred. Two days later, another Arafat crony was shot dead; and 16 days later, a third was slain.

It thus appears that the seizure of the luxury liner was less the result of retaliation against Israel's bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis on 30 September, than a new phase in the long-standing power struggle that has plagued the PLO and jeopardized Arafat's leadership. Indeed, evidence that the terrorists probably boarded the *Achille Lauro* some days in advance of the pirating suggests that the operation had been planned for some time.

Clearly, terrorism creates its own momentum and is often driven by the rivalry for prestige and worldwide attention among competing groups. In many cases, the targets of the terrorist acts--a TWA airliner, an Italian luxury liner--are peripheral to the motivation and reasons behind them. Hence, putting the *Achille Lauro* hijackers on trial in Italy or in America--while psychologically fulfilling--may have no bearing on terrorists' commitment to violence and, indeed, on their will to kill again.

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