



Directorate of
Intelligence

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Terrorism Review



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16 December 1985

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Terrorism Review

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Focus

Responsibility for the Egyptair Hijacking

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The radical Palestinian group Abu Nidal has claimed responsibility for hijacking the Egyptair jetliner from Athens on 23 November, but the extent of support from other radical terrorist groups or state sponsors is unclear. Libya, Egyptian dissidents, and radical Palestinians all have overlapping motivations that might foster cooperation, including attacking a moderate Arab regime such as Egypt, staging a publicity-getting terrorist event, and continuing the struggle against Israel.

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Abu Nidal

[Redacted] the Abu Nidal Group planned and executed the hijacking. The Arab Revolutionary Brigades—a covername sometimes used by Abu Nidal—claimed responsibility for the hijacking on 25 November jointly with the Egyptian Revolution. The case for Abu Nidal complicity is supported to varying degrees by the following:

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- The public statement declared that three Palestinians and two Egyptians carried out the attack, adding that their names and pictures would be forthcoming. Eyewitness reports have confirmed the existence of only three terrorists as yet.
- The pilot and some Egyptian passengers claimed the hijackers had regional accents that most likely were Palestinian.
- The coldblooded shootings of several passengers, including women, are consistent with Abu Nidal's penchant for extreme violence.

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The Abu Nidal Group has not attacked an Egyptian target since 1978, however, and has not carried out a hijacking in 11 years

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Abu Nidal could have used Egyptian operatives or carried out the attack on behalf of the Egyptian group.

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[Redacted] In an interview from Libya in September, a man purporting to be Sabri al-Banna (Abu Nidal's real name) claimed that his group supported the "Organization of Egypt's Revolution" and threatened attacks against the Mubarak regime.

[Redacted]

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The hijackers identified themselves as "Egyptian revolutionaries" who may be linked to the Egyptian Revolution, a little known, self-proclaimed nationalist movement that violently opposes the Camp David accords. This group claimed credit for assassinating one Israeli diplomat in Cairo last August and for wounding another in Cairo in June 1984.

[Redacted]

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Apart from the hijackers' demand to fly to Sigonella—where the aircraft carrying the intercepted pro-Arafat Palestinian hijackers of the Achille Lauro landed—another puzzle remains in naming the Abu Nidal Group as the perpetrator. The

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terrorists released 11 women after the plane landed, all Filipino and Egyptian. If Abu Nidal were responsible for the hijacking, we would expect at least the Palestinian women aboard to have been freed, yet several Palestinian women and eight children were not. Most of them died during the rescue attempt. [redacted]

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How Much Help From Libya?

[redacted] the Abu Nidal Group has forged closer ties to Libya. The group has operated from Damascus since 1983 but may have quarreled with Syria recently; [redacted]

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[redacted] Egypt claims that Sabri al-Banna is living in Tripoli and that Qadhafi paid \$6 million to carry out the hijacking. The Abu Nidal Group has its own agenda and resources to carry out attacks, however, and an additional state sponsor is unlikely to change the group's orientation. The group historically has accepted support from a variety of sources in order to maintain its independence. [redacted]

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Libya has strong motives to sponsor or encourage an attack against Egypt. The hijacking may have been intended to exact revenge on Mubarak for a series of successful "sting" operations against Libyan hit teams in the last year, and for Egypt's growing support for anti-Qadhafi dissidents. Qadhafi is committed to continuing pressure on Egypt to abrogate the Camp David accords and adopt a more militant posture toward Israel. Qadhafi may have believed he could strike at Mubarak at this time to capitalize on pro-Palestinian and anti-American sentiments in the wake of the Achille Lauro hijacking. [redacted]

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Libya's Role in the Hijacking

Libya's own activities during the hijacking are not conclusive, but the extent of Tripoli's involvement potentially ranges from opportunistic exploitation to active support. Tripoli could have financed, armed, and encouraged either Palestinian operatives or Egyptian dissidents to carry out the attack. Alternatively, Libya may have been unaware of the operation, but decided to exploit the hijacking for its own purposes. The following details what is known about Libyan involvement to date:

- The Libyan Ambassador to Malta was called to the airport by Maltese authorities because the hijackers initially demanded to fly to Tripoli or Tunisia.

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- When the hijackers later demanded to speak to Algerian or Libyan representatives, Maltese Government accounts indicate the Libyan Ambassador said he had been in touch with Libyan officials who condemned the hijacking and said the plane would not be allowed to land in Libya. The tower relayed this message to the hijackers and there are no further references to Libya during the course of the incident.
- Contrary to initial reporting, surviving passengers confirm that the Libyan Ambassador never boarded the plane.

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- On 24 November, the morning after the plane landed in Malta, the Libyan Charge in Kuwait secretly distributed leaflets to a Kuwaiti journalist in the name of the Egyptian Revolution that sounded as though the hijackers had written them. According to press reports citing a Kuwaiti source, the statement in the leaflets was handwritten by the Libyan Charge. This leads to suspicion that Libya may have had a hand as well in the joint Arab Revolutionary Brigades–Egyptian Revolution announcement.
- According to Egyptian officials, the surviving hijacker—now under guard in a Maltese hospital—wants to go to Libya to join his “brothers” there. The hijacker traveled on a Tunisian passport that probably is false; his true nationality is unknown at this time. He claims to be a Palestinian, born in Lebanon. [redacted] (b)(3)

On balance, we believe that the hijacking was planned by the Abu Nidal Group with the cooperation of Egyptian dissidents. We think the Abu Nidal Group probably trained the terrorists and may have provided a member of the hijacking team. [redacted] (b)(1)

At a minimum, Tripoli quickly moved to exploit the hijacking to serve its policy objectives. [redacted] (b)(3)

Following is a chronology of events. Times given are in GMT:

22 November

- 1905 Egyptair Flight 648, carrying 91 passengers and six crewmembers, takes off from Athens bound for Cairo.
- 1930 Well-dressed man stands up and takes gun out of plastic bag in his pocket. During search of passengers and collection of passports, an Egyptian sky marshal pulls his gun and kills one of the hijackers. The ensuing firefight damages the plane so that the cabin is depressurized and oxygen masks are released. Hijackers demand to land in Tunis or Tripoli, but damage forces emergency landing in Malta.
- 2115 Aircraft lands at Malta’s Luqa Airport. Maltese Prime Minister Bonnici already in the control tower.
- 2145 Hijackers ask for ambulance, engineer to assess damage. They threaten to start killing passengers every 15 minutes if demands are not met.
- Approximately 2200 Maltese doctor goes out to the plane. Two wounded flight attendants taken off. At some point after this, 11 women (four Egyptians and seven Filipinos) are released.
- 2250 Pilot reports a second person shot. First two persons shot later determined to have been Israeli women.

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2300 US Deputy Chief of Mission meets PLO representative who says he was called to the airport. Maltese Cabinet now meeting at airport.

2305 Third person shot, possibly American Patrick Baker.

24 November

0030 Hijackers threaten to kill another passenger within a half hour if demands are not met.

0045 Hijackers threaten to execute another passenger in 10 minutes. During negotiations with a senior Maltese official, hijackers demand fuel to go to Sigonella Airbase in Sicily. They pledge to spare passengers and release some of them if they get the fuel.

0100 Head Libyan diplomat in Malta arrives in tower and asks to speak with hijackers. The hijackers want fuel, however, before they will speak to Libyan Ambassador, they say.

0105 Tower asks plane to let the wounded be evacuated by ambulance. The hijackers want a reply to their demand for fuel first. They again threaten to kill a passenger if their demand is not met in 15 minutes.

0125 Hijacker advises tower that another passenger has been killed. Pilot confirms death of a passenger later, determined to be American Scarlett Rogenkamp. Hijackers threaten to kill yet another passenger.

0200 Half an hour later, hijackers repeat their threat to kill another passenger. Pilot says six persons now dead. This would include American Jackie Pflug as fifth passenger casualty. Of the six, only Rogenkamp and the hijacker killed in the takeover were actually dead; Baker, Pflug, and the two Israeli women were wounded.

0210 Hijackers threaten to kill a passenger every 10 minutes unless the airport has the lights around the aircraft turned off. They also threaten to blow up the aircraft if any vehicles come near the plane.

0215 Pilot says bodies of four dead have been pushed out of aircraft.

Aproximately 0300 Lights around plane are turned off. Maltese security men, defying a warning from the hijackers, pick up survivors and bodies under aircraft.

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0400 One hijacker reported to be in cockpit; the second at rear of aircraft. At least one is said to have a handgrenade.

0415 Hijackers request food, including infant formula, for crewmembers and passengers.

0715 Hijackers make further threats against all the passengers if Maltese officials do not refuel the aircraft.

0750 Pilot tells tower that hijackers will kill another passenger soon and asks that the tower alert a hospital to the forthcoming casualties.

0830 Egyptian C-130 lands at Luqa Airport carrying commandos from "777" counterterrorist unit under command of Maj. Gen. Mohammed Kamal Din. Plane then attempts to move to position out of view of hijackers.

0900 Hijackers evidently have seen the plane and ask the tower about it. They threaten to blow up aircraft if they see anyone nearby, especially in military uniforms.

0905 Pilot says another passenger has just been executed and the body dumped under the aircraft.

1000 Hijackers ask for the chief of the Libyan People's Bureau (LPB) in Malta to board plane. He tells hijackers that he must obtain permission from Tripoli in order to do so.

1015 Another passenger reportedly killed. Number of dead now reported to be seven. Hijackers request to speak to Algerian or Libyan officials. The Maltese Prime Minister allegedly told them there was no Algerian mission and asked if they wanted to talk to a PLO representative. The hijacker then asks for the Libyan LPB man again.

1045 Pilot tells tower hijackers want to know where the Algerian and Libyan Ambassadors are. Tower says the Libyan will come back soon but that there is no Algerian representative in Malta. Pilot tells tower to get the Libyan official quickly because the terrorists are getting impatient.

1200 An Egyptian newsman notifies US Embassy in Cairo that President Mubarak has accused Libyan leader Qadhafi of involvement in the hijacking and has placed forces in Western Military District on alert.

1210 Tower informs hijackers that Libyan LPB chief will arrive soon.

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1225 Libyan Ambassador says he has contacted Tripoli, which condemned the hijacking and denied the aircraft permission to go to Libya. He said he would not board the plane and reportedly left the control tower.

1230 Hijackers again threaten the death of another passenger shortly if they do not receive fuel.

1315 Pilot says that hijackers have seen soldiers in small buildings near the aircraft. Hijackers demand soldiers move away or they will be fired on.

1330 Hijackers ask for a vehicle to remove a body under the aircraft. They demand that food be delivered before the body can be taken away.

1749 Pilot tells the tower in English that the aircraft's main doors are sealed from the inside and that only the wing door is available from the outside. He then says in Arabic that the hijacker is with him now and wants the tarmac to be lighted when ground power arrives. Pilot later claims he took advantage of hijacker's poor command of English to pass his message.

1920 Egyptian commandos blow off cargo doors of aircraft and begin rescue attempt. Between this explosion and handgrenades thrown by hijackers, fire starts, claiming 57 lives. Egyptians claim to have fired only seven or eight shots. One surviving hijacker taken to hospital under guard.

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