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THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACHILLE LAURO HIJACKING
FOR THE MARITIME COMMUNITY

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- The prospects that terrorist attacks at sea will become a regular form of international terrorism.
- The need for improved security measures at ports and aboard ships.
- The feasibility of designing and implementing an intelligence sharing network for the maritime community.

THE HIJACKING OF THE ACHILLE LAURO

On October 3, 1985, the Italian cruise liner *Achille Lauro* left its home port of Genoa for a twelve day trip that was to include stops in Egypt and Israel. Carrying more than 750 passengers from several nations and a predominantly Italian crew of 331, the ship entered the port of Alexandria on October 7. Most of the passengers disembarked for a day-long tour of Egypt, with the remaining passengers and crew, numbering approximately 400, continuing to Port Said at the head of the Suez Canal.

Shortly after leaving Alexandria, however, four Palestinian terrorists seized control of the ship. According to a number of reports, the hijacking began after a waiter discovered the Palestinians cleaning their weapons in their cabin. It was believed that the terrorists, who boarded the ship in Genoa, had planned to carry out an attack at the Israeli port of Ashdod, one of the stops on the cruise. This was to be in retaliation for the October 1 Israeli raid on the headquarters of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Tunisia.

The hijackers ordered the ship to sail towards Tartus, Syria, where Syrian authorities denied permission for the ship to enter the port. It was off the Syrian coast that the terrorists killed Leon Klinghoffer, an elderly American who was confined to a wheelchair, and threw his body overboard. The ship then returned to 15 miles off the coast of Port Said, where Egyptian and PLO officials negotiated an end to the hijacking. The Palestinians were given safe passage out of Egypt in exchange for the release of the hostages and the ship. The Egyptian government subsequently claimed that it had no knowledge that anybody aboard the ship had been killed.

In a rapid sequence of events, U.S. Navy F-14 fighter planes intercepted the Egyptian airliner carrying the hijackers and Palestine Liberation Front leader Abul Abbas, the mastermind of the terrorist operation. The Egyptian plane was forced to land at a U.S.-Italian military base in Sicily, where Italian officials arrested the four hijackers, but allowed Abul Abbas to leave the country. This action led to the temporary collapse of the government of Prime Minister Bettino Craxi. The aftermath of the *Achille Lauro* incident also caused relations to be strained between the United States and both Egypt and Italy.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACHILLE LAURO HIJACKING FOR THE MARITIME COMMUNITY

Prospects for Increased Terrorism at Sea

Among the issues raised by the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* is whether the incident is indicative of a trend towards increased terrorism at sea. Maritime targets have been attacked over the years, with oil tankers, cargo ships, ferries, and fishing vessels being the victims of various types of bombings and hijackings. Cruise liners have also been targeted for terrorist attacks in the past. In 1961, the Portuguese passenger liner *Santa Maria* was hijacked off the coast of Brazil, while in 1972, a terrorist plot to hijack an Italian passenger ship between Cyprus and Israel was foiled. In 1973, an American citizen was convicted of attempting to extort \$250,000 from Princess Cruises by threatening to blow up a passenger liner at sea. That same year a bomb exploded aboard a Greek charter ship carrying 250 U.S. tourists to Israel. There were no casualties, although the ship sank in Beirut harbor following the explosion. In 1982, a series of bomb threats were directed at the Canadian passenger ferry vessel "Princess Marguerite" which was enroute from Seattle, Washington to British Columbia. The vessel returned to port, and a search uncovered no explosives.

There has thus been a history of terrorist attacks and threats of attacks against a variety of maritime targets. Thus far, however, the majority of international terrorist incidents have taken place on land for several obvious reasons. First, the *number* of potential targets on land far exceeds those at sea or at ports. If terrorists want to bomb a government building, or seize a foreign Embassy, or assassinate an individual, there is little difficulty in finding numerous appropriate targets. Second, terrorists have a wider *variety* of potential targets on land. In addition to symbols of government, targets can include power lines, airport terminals, hotels, cafes, business offices, military installations, and numerous other types of targets. Third, the virtual unlimited number of land targets ensures that adequate security at all facilities can never be provided. Thus, terrorists are likely to perceive a large number of "soft", or unprotected targets on land. Furthermore, most attacks on land can be carried out without very sophisticated equipment or elaborate logistical planning. While this may also be true for certain types of maritime terrorism, such as placing a bomb in a port facility or aboard a cruise liner, generally speaking terrorist attacks at sea require more sophistication and capabilities than terrorists currently possess.¹

Nevertheless, despite the tendency for terrorists to favor land attacks, the maritime community is likely to come under increased risk of terrorism in the years to come. One reason for this is the overall increase in terrorism worldwide. International terrorism has been growing at an annual rate of approximately 12-15%, which means that by the early 1990s there could very well be a doubling in the number of incidents.² Between 1984 and 1985, terrorist incidents as recorded in The Rand Chronology of International Terrorism increased approximately 25%, with close to 500 incidents reported. With international terrorism

¹Brian Michael Jenkins with Bonnie Cordes, Karen Gardela, and Geraldine Petty, *A Chronology of Terrorist Attacks and Other Criminal Actions Against Maritime Targets*, The Rand Corporation, P-6906, September 1983.

²Brian Michael Jenkins, *Future Trends in International Terrorism*, The Rand Corporation, P-7176, December 1985, p. 9.

clearly on the rise, the likelihood of it spilling over into the maritime environment increases. It will become increasingly difficult for shipping interests, port facilities, and other maritime targets to escape the impact of international terrorism.

One reason why terrorists may begin to focus more on the maritime environment is the need to ensure that their actions receive maximum publicity and keep the general public, as well as governments and industry, in a constant state of fear and uncertainty over the course of terrorism. Thus, since bombings of government buildings and hijackings of airplanes have become somewhat routine, terrorists may tend to increase the level of violence against the same targets (more powerful car-bombs, time-bombs aboard aircraft) or seek relatively newer targets (cruise liners).

The maritime environment is thus potentially attractive to terrorists since it represents a rather unexplored terrain for which they can use familiar tactics such as bombings and hijackings, and also develop new tactics, such as the firing of underwater missiles or detonation of remote control devices at ports and on ships. In the wake of the mid-air bombings of Air India and TWA aircraft, it would not be surprising to see similar types of time-bombs placed aboard cruise ships, passenger vessels, and cargo ships.

Another reason why the maritime environment may be a particularly attractive target for terrorists is its vital link with international commerce. Terrorists who want to strike a blow to a nation's economy, or to adversely affect international trade can find important targets both at ports and at sea. A series of attacks against international shipping, similar to the recent wave of attacks against symbols of international travel, could very well result in a reduction of international trade and commerce, just as the recent incidents have adversely affected international tourism and travel.

At times the shipping industry may find itself the victim of threats of terrorism related to guerrilla insurgencies. Early this year, the British, American, Canadian, and Australian Embassies in Sri Lanka received letters warning that tea shipments destined for export had been contaminated with potassium cyanide. The Tamil Eelam Army, which is fighting the Sri Lankan government and the Sinhalese majority

for a separate Tamil state, took credit for the threats. Although the threats were officially discounted, it resulted in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration testing all black tea imported from Sri Lanka.

Maritime targets also provide terrorists with a means for threatening the vital interests of a nation. The free flow of commerce, the ability of naval vessels to enter and exit ports, and the communication links between ship and shore are all important aspects of national security. While it is beyond the capabilities of current terrorist groups to launch a large-scale attack on key harbors and ships, the growing trend of state-sponsored terrorism can not rule out such scenarios for the future. State-sponsors can provide terrorists with the weapons, logistical support, and intelligence necessary to carry out sophisticated attacks against a nation's maritime assets.

The maritime environment can also serve as the basis for symbolic victories by terrorists. A terrorist attack that sinks just one military or commercial vessel of a nation, or incapacitates one harbor would have a great impact upon the public, and give terrorists the publicity that they seek. This was apparently the motive behind the firing of three mortar shells on NATO warships in the port of Lisbon in January 1985. Although the shells fell short of their target, the attack by the Popular Forces of April 25 (FP-25), a leftist Portuguese group, indicates that anti-NATO terrorism is not limited to land-based attacks.

Terrorism at sea has thus taken several forms, and there undoubtedly will be more incidents of maritime violence in the future. While it is too early to state whether the seizing of the *Achille Lauro* by terrorists will be the beginning of a global trend of hijackings at sea, it would not hurt the maritime community to proceed as if it does forebode such a trend. In that way, a process could begin now of increased security awareness among those responsible for the safety of sea travel.

The Security Implications of the Achille Lauro Incident

The *Achille Lauro* incident raises several questions concerning the security measures that are taken by the shipping industry in general, and cruise liners in particular. Since maritime terrorism has not been as prominent and widespread as other forms of terrorism, the seizing of a cruise ship caught the industry off guard. It also clearly demonstrated the need for tighter security at ports and aboard ships.

Among the implications of the *Achille Lauro* is that it demonstrated how easily terrorists can penetrate security on ships. According to reports, there were several times during the sequence of events leading up to the hijacking that suspicions by officials and crew members should have been raised and some action taken. One of the Palestinian terrorists had taken a number of earlier voyages on the *Achille Lauro*, posing as a Greek shipping agent in order to ease the cruise liner, and had reportedly befriended members of the crew.³ While such action alone would not necessarily raise suspicions, there should perhaps be some procedure for checking more carefully the passports of those individuals who become conspicuous either through frequency of travel on the same cruise liner, or through behavior that departs from the norm. Once aboard the ship, the four Palestinians aroused the suspicions of both passengers and crew due to their nervous and anti-social behavior. At one point before the hijacking began, a hostess asked one of the Palestinians what his nationality was, and was told he was Norwegian. That alone should have raised alarm bells: There were also reports that the picture of one of the hijackers had actually been glued to his passport.

Yet the security dimensions of the *Achille Lauro* incident go beyond issues of false passports and failure of passengers and crew to voice to authorities concerns they may have had about certain passengers aboard the ship. It also involves a lack of adequate preventive measures taken by the shipping industry in the area of international terrorism. Several of the hostages stated that they had seen no security measures when they boarded the ship. There were even reports of holes in the

³Washington Post, October 13, 1985, p.A22.

security screen. Industry officials have acknowledged that security precautions at ports and aboard cruise ships lag far behind those taken at airports and on airlines. There are no security regulations in the shipping industry similar to those that were issued by the United States Federal Aviation Administration following the hijackings of the 1960s. According to one official, security measures on shipping lines consist basically of just limiting access to the ship to passengers with tickets and guests who register when they go on board.* Unlike airports, there is no X-ray or metal detection equipment at ports.

An issue that is raised by the lapses in security in the *Achille Lauro* incident is what balance should be struck between increased security measures and potentially long delays for embarkments and arrivals. The experience of the airlines may serve as a case in point. After just a short period of delays when the new equipment of X-ray machines and metal detectors were introduced years ago, movement through airports returned to almost normal. Yet even if some sacrifice in passenger comfort needs to be made, it would appear to be well worth the cost given the events of last year. As one top Israeli port official stated at a recent conference on maritime terrorism: "I'd rather be unpopular and survive, than be popular and have my ships be the victim of terrorist attacks."

The need for better security will become even more apparent to the shipping industry should the family of slain American passenger Leon Klinghoffer win the \$1.5 billion lawsuit that has been filed against several parties, including the owners and operators of the *Achille Lauro* and Italian port authorities. If they win, the costs of inadequate security will become even more apparent to the shipping industry, even beyond the revenues that have been lost by cancellation of cruises and passenger sea travel in the wake of last fall's hijacking.

Thus, the issue of what preventive measures to take against terrorism is something that the maritime community will have to address. As with other targets of terrorism, such as government facilities, military bases, and airports, there can never be one hundred percent security. Yet to the extent that the shipping industry begins a serious

**New York Times*, October 9, 1985.

effort to tighten security at ports and aboard ships, the long-term interests of sea travel will be better served.

Intelligence Gathering and Dissemination

While improved security measures may prevent certain terrorists from boarding a ship or smuggling weapons and bombs aboard, there is also a need for better intelligence concerning the likelihood of future incidents. Just as good security can be thought of as the last line of defense against terrorists, good intelligence is a vital first line of defense. Since the maritime industry does not have the resources or capabilities to design and implement their own intelligence network, they will need to rely upon outside agencies, both government and private, to help keep them informed about potential threats to ships and ports.

One problem with intelligence warnings concerning potential terrorist attacks is the difficulty in knowing exactly when or where a planned action will take place. Thus, in the case of the *Achille Lauro* incident, Israel had warned the intelligence services of Italy and several other friendly governments more than six months earlier that terrorist groups had been training to hijack a ship.⁵ However, it could not be determined when or where the hijacking would take place. Nevertheless, even warnings of a general nature concerning potential terrorism in the high seas should serve to make the shipping industry more alert and thus take better precautions.

Any intelligence system that is utilized by the shipping industry will need to be a combination of information received from different governments, different agencies within governments, and numerous private sources. In this sense it will face a problem familiar to any organization with a multitude of information that passes before it; namely, which information to act upon, and which to ignore. However, the violent nature of terrorism would seem to argue for taking all potential threats and information regarding threats seriously, rather than risking ignoring information that later turns out to be accurate.

⁵Los Angeles Times, October 9, 1985.

In addition to stepping up efforts to obtain information concerning the activities, patterns, tactics, and characteristics of terrorists who may attack ships and ports, the maritime community also needs to undertake a risk assessment of the various targets that may be attractive to terrorists. Since allocation of resources for security protection is usually limited, efforts should be concentrated on those maritime assets that may be of such critical importance to a nation's security that even the minimum risk of attack could not be tolerated, or on those ports and ships that are situated in high-threat areas.

↙ The *Achille Lauro* hijacking can serve as an important reminder to the shipping industry that in this age of rising terrorism worldwide, no group or commercial interest is immune from attack. To view the seizing of the cruise liner as an "isolated incident unlikely to recur" would not only be wishful thinking, but also potentially dangerous thinking if it prevents the maritime community from becoming more attentive to the threat of terrorism.
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⁶*New York Times*, October 10, 1985.