

The Consequence of Achille Lauro's Hijacking in 1985 and its Impact on the Italian Government that's Lead to its Downfall

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Abstract

On Monday, October 7, 1980, four young men belonging to the Palestine Liberation Front hijacked the Italian ship Achille Lauro off the coast of Egypt, as it was sailing from Alexandria, heading to Ashdod in Israel, according to the scheduled itinerary, with planning by the leader of the Front, Muhammad Zidan (Abu Al-Abbas). The duration of the hijacking was 51 days, during which the kidnappers killed a 69-year-old American Jewish disabled man using a wheelchair, named Leon Klinghofer, and threw him from the ship into the Mediterranean Sea. The negotiations were between the kidnappers and the Egypt government, which represented the Italian government. The ambassadors of the countries that have citizens on the ship's board were in charge of managing the negotiations.

Keywords: Hijack, terror attack.

1. Introduction

On Monday, October 7, 1980, four young men belonging to the Palestine Liberation Front hijacked the Italian ship Achille Lauro off the coast of Egypt, as it was sailing from Alexandria, heading to Ashdod in Israel, according to the scheduled itinerary, with planning by the leader of the Front, Muhammad Zidan (Abu Al-Abbas). The duration of the hijacking was 51 days, during which the kidnappers killed a 69-year-old American Jewish disabled man using a wheelchair, named Leon Klinghofer, and threw him from the ship into the Mediterranean Sea. The negotiations were between the kidnappers and the Egypt government, which represented the Italian government. The ambassadors of the countries that have citizens on the ship's board were in charge of managing the negotiations. The Palestine Liberation Organization also participated in the negotiations as well, everyone tried to end the kidnapping without bloodshed as much as possible. The Egypt government succeeded in ending the kidnapping in exchange for giving safety to the kidnappers and handing them over to the Palestine Liberation Front in Tunisia on an Egyptian plane. after the United States government know about the elderly American's death , the American planes have cut off the Egyption plane's path and forced it to land at Sigonella Airport on the island of Sicily. Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi categorically refused to break

in the Egyptian plane or arrest anyone on board. This caused tension in US-Italian relations, in addition to the tension within the Italian government itself.

The downfall of Craxi government and the tension in Italian-American relations

First: Tension in American-Italian relations

On Thursday, October 10 the official Egyptian statements continued to point to the fact that the kidnappers had already left the country, after the majority of the concerned parties agreed to hand over the armed men to the Palestine Liberation Organization to stand before its judicial authorities. The Tunisian government had refused to allow the Egyptian civilian plane to land on its territories by the American authorities order, and the Egyptian plane was intercepted by American (F-14 Tom cat)(1) on the return flight, where the latter forced it to change its path and to go to Sigonella air base(2) . However, shortly before midnight, the President Reagan have called Craxi to inform him That the American military aircraft intercepted an Egyptian plane in the Mediterranean Sea that carries the hijackers on it, and by that Craxi agreed on the Egyptian plane landing at NATO's Sigonella baseIn Sicily(3), the Egyptian plane, Boeing 737(4), belonging to the Egyptian Airlines, landed about half an hour later, and in a subsequent telephone conversation with President Reagan, Craxi announced that the four hijackers who were on board the plane would be detained in Italy waiting to their trial, and he decided to arrest other Palestinians that were on the board of the plane, (including Abu Abbas) Until further investigations were conducted, during Friday, October 11, the four hijackers were transported to a location in Syracuse, and their identities were confirmed by American passengers dispatched to Sicily from Achille Lauro. The American pressure continued to arrest Abbas, and culminated in an official American request prepared by American lawyers in accordance with the extradition agreement for fugitive criminals between America and Italy. It was delivered early on Saturday morning , October 12, including the temporary detention of Abu al-Abbas ,awaiting the extradition of Abu al-Abbas, who left early that evening, meanwhile, during the night, the Egyptian plane with Abu Abbas on it headed to Rome(5). This led to a heated uproar discussion between American and Italian forces in Rome over the right of either country to arrest the four gunmen including the planner of the operation (Abu Abbas) and his bodyguard(6), and this almost portended dire consequences(7).

The American President was able to remedy the situation, and ordered to the American forces to Withdrawal, however, one of the US Army generals tracked down the Egyptian plane when it took off from the base. Heading to Rome, despite the objection of the Italian air traffic controller, meanwhile the Italian government submitted an official protest to the American government against this behavior, and it is known that the American Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, did not inform his Italian counterpart about the hijacking of the Egyptian plane and the attempt to land at the military airport inSicily, until the plane was forced to land on the airport's ground, meaning that the United States did not ask permission from the Italian government about the Egyptian plane landing at the Italian airport, which prompted the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Giulio Andreotti, to declare that the United States acted in the matter of the Egyptian plane ((as if Italy was an occupied territory)) (8), the United States requested the arrest of the four Palestinians who were on board the plane, as well as Muhammad Abbas and

his bodyguard, Izz al-Din Badrqan, and transfer them to the United States. However, the Italian authorities refused to bring them before the American judiciary. The Italian Prime Minister indicated that the crimes were committed on an Italian ship, carrying the Italian flag, and therefore fall under the Italian law. Despite the American President's agreement that the proceedings of this trial take place in Italy, he reserved his country's right to request the extradition of the kidnappers(9). Under the pretext that the hijackers could be tried in both countries , in the United States for killing the American citizen Leon Klinghofer, and in Italy for the kidnapping. This perception was reinforced by the statement of the US Secretary of Defense that his country did not violate its legitimate rights by intercepting the Egyptian plane, because there is an An American law version issued in 1984 gives the government the authority to arrest and punish anyone kidnaps or kills American citizens wherever he or they are(10). And With the Italian insistence about rejecting the American request, Andreotti declared that the United States had finally agreed after intense negotiations that Italy is going to prosecute the kidnappers, but its deed about allowing Abu Abbas to leaveOn its land, On Saturday morning, and its announcement that there was no reason to arrest him, and that he had left early that day (11) on the scheduled Yugoslav flight to Belgrade, after he had taken off from the Rome military airport (Mbino) to the international civil airport (Fiumicino) on an Egyptian Boeing plane(12).

This disregard for the American demand to hand him over to them led to a further deterioration in American-Italian relations(13). The American ambassador in Rome, a few minutes after Abu Abbas left the Italian capital, and on direct orders from President Reagan and his Secretary of State Shultz, submitted a strongly worded and indignant protest to the Italian government, Italy's response to this was represented by its Prime Minister refused to meet with the American ambassador and transferred him to one of his assistant office without any conversation taking place between the American ambassador and him . Andreotti stated that the Italian behavior was based on the international law rules in terms of: 1 - Italy does not have any evidence that Abu Al-Abbas had a hand in the ship hijacking. 2- Abu Al-Abbas holds a diplomatic passport. 3- the Italian law refuses to extradite anyone accused of committing a crime punishable by death to any country whose law stipulates this punishment. 4- Italy does not have the right to arrest a passenger who came on an Egyptian government plane, without conclusive evidence necessitating that he must be arrested (14).

On the other hand, Craxi later revealed a number of facts, including that the United States did not object to the Italian proposal to seek the help of its friends from the Arab countries rulers and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and to make efforts to persuade the hijackers of the Italian ship to retreat, in order to save the passengers lives who are on the ship board, unconditionally. He added that they in America had asked me not only to seek the help of the PLO, but more than that, they asked me to ask Yasser Arafat, the head of the organization, to announce his condemnation of kidnapping, and this is what the Palestinian leader did. The day after the request)) and in the context of the increasing deterioration of relations between Rome and Washington, Craxi hinted about his intention not to participate in the Western Summit called for by the American President on October 24 in New York, to prepare for his meeting withThe Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (15),which meant more burden for the American president, especially after the French President François Mitterrand (16) refused to participate in this

meeting, which increased the tension between the American-Italian relations, and people dissatisfaction with the American behavior towards the repercussions of the Italian ship, and which the Italian official authorities considered as a blatant assault on Italy's sovereignty, and therefore the United States have to remedy the situation and solve it, especially after the American President has realized that the Italian feeling of resentment and anger will gradually turn into blatant hostility against the United States, and this is what he does not want. Therefore, he took the initiative to apologize to the Italian government, thus resolving the crisis of disagreement between the two countries(17).

Second: The internal repercussions in Italy

The Socialist Prime Minister took over the control of the Italian government in August 1983, with a majority of 366 votes Parliament(18), in a government coalition consisting of five parties. The parliament included : the Christian Democratic(19) Republican(20), Liberal(21), Italian Communist Socialist, (22) and Social Democratic parties(23). And by that Craxi government set a record of survival that Italy had not witnessed in the last few years, and spent exactly 805 days, during which it achieved notable successes at the internal level, and Craxi became The man of the hour in Italy(24). However, the method that followed by The Italian government in dealing with the Italian ship and the Egyptian plane matter has sparked a dispute within the ruling coalition. While the Socialist Party and the Christian Democratic Party supported Craxi in managing the crisis, the Republican Party condemned the decision of allowing Abu Abbas to leave the country for three reasons, which are, firstly, neglect of the rule of collective decision-making, which means the government took the decision without their consultation, even though Giovanni Spadolini, leader of the Republican Party and Minister of Defense in the Italian government, stated that he requested a cabinet meeting to agree on a unified decision according to the United States' demand to hand over Abu Abbas. Secondly Spadolini believes that the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ignored an official American request to hand over Abu Abbas. Third, the Republican Party believes that Italy's policy towards the Middle East is largely biased towards Mr. Yasser Arafat, while it is not open to Israel, and therefore it is an unbalanced policy. The Liberal and Social Democratic parties share the Republican Party's opinion of condemning the behavior of the Italian government, but they sought to avoid causing a ministerial crisis(25)

The Italian ship accident and its developments reveals the differences between Giovanni Spadolini's behavior and his prime minister. While Spadolini agreed to the US Secretary of Defense's request for the Egyptian plane to land at the Sigonella base, and for the US forces to arrest the Palestinians, as well as Abu Abbas and his colleague, and transfer them to the United States despite of what This include a blatant attack on Italy's sovereignty. Craxi's behavior was characterized by national independence and non-submission to American pressure, and Italy's right to try the kidnappers according to Italian law, and allowing Abu Abbas to leave the country, and the Republican Party intention in creating obstacles to Craxi government that known for its Atlantic and Israeli tendencies (The majority of this party are Jews) and loyal to the United States, the party threatened to resign from the government coalition, as its comments regarding Italian policy towards the Middle East were ignored. Then it quickly escalated the situation by

creating a ministerial crisis, with the resignation of his leader, Spadolini, and his two colleagues in the party, which are the Minister of Labor and the Minister of Relations with Parliament. The resignation of three ministers from the government that consist of 20 ministers led to the resignation of the whole government, and this actually happened on the 17th October, and by Italy was suffering a new ministerial crisis (26) .

It should be noted that the Leftist parties have confronted the Italian Minister of Defense through their newspapers and said that if he wants to cause an actual government crisis, he must announce this openly and without equivocation(27). In this regard, the opposition Communist Party announced its support for the Italian government in the way it deals with the Italian ship accident, and think It did well by opposing the illegal American intervention and refusing to hand over Abu Abbas to Washington and allowing him to leave the country for Yugoslavia(28).The communists declared their readiness to stand in solidarity with all other political and democratic forces that agree to work for peace in the Middle East. In the same context, all the Italian trade unions denounced The Republicans deeds to make a ministerial crisis, because the future of government will be dark, and no party can predict the duration of the crisis and the appropriate solutions for it. This led, as a result, to the formation of the forty-fifth Italian government, It is common practice in Italian political life to assign the former prime minister to form the new government. Indeed, Italian President Francesco Cossiga(29)following his meeting and prominent Italian political events, authorized Craxi to assume the transitional ministry and start consultations the forty-fifth government in Italian history since The Second World War, and Craxi's intention was guarantee success by the vote on his government in the Parliament without the Republicans and form a four-way coalition government. Despite the difficulty of achieving this, he did additional negotiations with Spadolini, the leader of the Republican Party, for his participation in the new government coalition. Spadolini stated at that time that his party would accept Rejoining Craxi's government, if the coalition parties agree to the conditions that include the establishment of a device that ensures better consultations between the members of the government in case of crises, re-evaluating and defining Italy's European, American and Middle Eastern policy, and creating balance in Italian relations with Israel and Arab countries. Craxi succeeded after numerous consultations and efforts to form a center-left government coalition that included the same the political forces in his former government. the new government won the confidence of the Senate by a majority of 180 votes against 101, with one member abstaining from voting, and the confidence of the House of Representatives by a majority of 347 votes, against 238, and one member abstained from voting. This came at the end of a stormy session In the House of Representatives regarding Italy's policy towards the Middle East, a violent argument took place during this session that almost brought Italy into a new ministerial crisis, when Giorgio La Malfa(30), Vice-President of the Republican Party, who also serves as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, accused the Palestine Liberation Organization of terrorism, which made Craxi upset from this boycott, and said, "The PLO should be judged by the history logic, as it is a movement struggling to liberate its country which is under occupation, and I do not deny this historical right and Its legitimacy when it resorts to the means of armed struggle, and whoever denies this right is like someone who challenges the history path." He added, "But despite that, I am convinced that the Palestinian

issue will not be solved through armed struggle. Israel's rights must also be guaranteed, but it has been occupying an Arab lands for 18 years. We believe that Israel must return these lands in exchange for peace)) (31) Through this, we see that the Italian political orientations towards the conflict in the Middle East are varied and different, and this difference includes the ruling coalition parties in particular, and the relations within the Western alliance in general. Italy considers the Palestine Liberation Organization to be the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and insists on involve it in any matter of settlement on the Middle East, and opposes as much as it can any attempt of ignore it. Rome supports the Jordanian-Palestinian agreement, supports the slogan (land for peace), and seeks to play a prominent role within the European Community to participate in the peace settlement in the Middle East. This policy was supported under Craxi's government, and its Foreign Minister Andreotti, Craxi maintains good relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization and its leader Yasser Arafat. It is known that the Italian government has officially denounced, strongly and clearly, the Israeli raid on the organization's headquarters in Hammam chott in Tunisia. caraxi described this raid as violating the international laws and norms, which made the Israeli government's angry at him and his foreign minister. (32)The italian policy helped to quickly resolve the crisis of the Italian ship, through negotiation with the Palestinian Liberation Organization and its leaders and with the Egyptian authorities, especially since it later became clear that the Italian ship was not targeted, nor were its passengers, Italians and non-Italians(32). In his statement before the House of Representatives, the Socialist Prime Minister was keen to have the government coalition parties approve the document he prepared regarding his country's policy towards the Palestine Liberation Organization. and among the most memorable things it stated that the crisis in the Middle East is the most complex and dangerous crises. On one hand, there is a conflict between the countries there that still unresolved. and on the other hand, there is the Palestinian issue that requires an inevitable solution. Italy intends to continue its constructive contribution to find comprehensive, just, and peaceful settlement for the Arab-Israeli conflict with the agreement of the European partners and to also contact the United States. It excludes any Military solution Italy always sees the necessity of respecting and ensuring the security of Israel and the Arab countries in the region "(33).

The Italian government's way in dealing with the kidnapping incident resulted in a number of notable results: the continuity of the center-left governments led by Bettino Craxi(34), who emerged victorious in this crisis. For the first time in Italy, a political leader emerged with such an independent character, defending his country's sovereignty in the face of the American ally. and thus the increasing popularity of Craxi throughout the country, become clear through an opinion poll published by the Italian newspaper L'Espresso(35),from which it became clear that 61% of Italians are convinced that Craxi government had behaved well during the kidnapping, and that 65% of Italians believe that Craxi will remain in power until the end of the current legislative session, while less than 20% believe that it is a big mistake to disturb the alliance and relations with the United States on that occasion, 51% of Italians condemned the United States behavior, as they believed that Washington behaved badly or very badly during the incident, and an even more majority criticized the behavior of the Republican Party, so more than 60% of Italians said that the secretary of this party made a mistake by forcing the government to resign

after he decided that his party would withdraw from it. 2 - Spadolini powerlessness, both ministerial and popular. Perhaps the Ministry of Defense, which he currently holds, is the last position in Spadolini's political life, and that next year may witness the end of his leadership of the Republican Party. 3 - The United States initiative to contain the deterioration of its relationship with Italy, and this was represented in the American serious movements, whether by the efforts made by (John C. Whitehead) (36), Deputy Secretary of State and the US President's envoy, in his discussions with Craxi, the next Prime Minister, to consult on any matter. An issue of concern to both countries. the Spokesperson for the United States Department of State also stated that his country and Italy share the willingness to eliminate terrorism and respond firmly to the threat of international terrorism. He pointed out that Italy is an important ally and United States friend, and that American-Italian relations have been and will remain solid, deep and strong. Close friends cannot be have no difficulty in discussing their disagreement honestly, and in a friendly atmosphere and in a way to appease the Italian President, the American President sent him an official letter, beginning with (Dear Pettino), at a time when Craxi had not yet become the actual head of the new Italian government(37), although American-Italian relations could be describe after the ship hijacking incident, and as Craxi put it, as being in the calm phase after the storm, In the Italian-American relations file, there appear to be possibilities to reconsider the agreements under which NATO and the United States are authorized to use many naval and air forces in Italy, including the base in Sigonella. As a senior official source in the Italian Ministry of Defense stated, we cannot allow the bases Which on our lands to be used against us, 5 - The continued deterioration in relations between Rome and Tel Aviv, in addition to Israeli resentment of the Italian condemnation against the raid on the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Hammam chott in Tunisia(38), the Italian Prime Minister's statement on the legitimacy of the Palestinian armed struggle caused a storm inside Israel. The Deputy Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Yeshayahu Anouk, who is in the italian affairs charge in tel aviv, informed that Craxi's statement deeply hurt Israel, and he was informed of Israel's protest, but Italy rejected this protest. Rather, Craxi repeated his statements, and cited the United Nations Charter, which guaranteed the right for peoples to resort to armed struggle for the sake of self-determination and independence. He also cited a statement by the former Pope of the Vatican, Paul VI, it can be allow resorting to weapons in cases of clear tyranny that detracts from civil rights and harms the homeland. A statement issued by the Italian Prime Minister's Office, on November 7, indicated that the Israeli ambassador in Rome was informed that the statements attributed to the Italian Prime Minister by the Tel Aviv government are completely far from accurate. The memorandum added that the Israeli government's assessment of the content of Craxi's statements is a distortion of the truth, and does not reflects the true meaning of the words that came from him. In this regard, the Israeli ambassador was informed that the memorandum of protest that he had submitted based on instructions from his government would not be accepted. On the other hand, Craxi's behavior and statements were met with clear Arab support, it was evident by the Arab regimes statements and their satisfaction with Italian Middle Eastern policy, and the desire for further development between the Italian Arabic relations in various fields(39)

The internal impact of Achille Lauro affair has destabilized the Italian political scene. Although Craxi government has now been reinstalled after several difficult weeks of political activity, the new government expected to be weaker than its predecessor. They will have greater difficulty to pass the finance bill through Parliament before the end of the year. the Achille Lauro case may have set back the Middle East peace process and certainly tarnished the image of the Palestine Liberation Organization. On the other hand, there is a reason to hope that This experience will make Italians think again about the terrorist threat and the ability of terrorists to move and conspire freely inside Italy, and take more stringent measures to confront this threat(40).

The Achille Lauro takeover happened after a short period of a series terrorist bombings in Rome, one of them targeting a British Airways office. Italians are not cowards in the face of terrorists, but the way they dealt with the Red Brigades in this decade is a proof of that. But Italy's borders are open and accessible to many Arabs who want to make Italy their hunting target. There are now signs of a more conscious desire to address the terrorist threat by imposing strict controls on entry and residency and tightening visa regulations. It appears that the Americans have not realized the changes. What happened here made the country grow in self-confidence after two years of one of its most stable governments after the war Italy gained greater respect in the world(41).

Craxi government was willing to defend its interests, so the harsh American reaction to the Craxi decision to release Abbas hurted and upset Italian's pride, and the fact that it did not lead to anti-American hostility, both in the press and in the reality, It is a testimony to the strength of the relationship between the two countries, but it hurted the national feeling that the Americans seem to have ignored. It provided craxi with a new popular support(42). On the contrary, it weakened the popular support for the Republican Party because they were provoked the governmental crisis, but craxi's government that's very loyal to the united states has been downfall, it seems to me that this's stiff price italian have to be paid because they let their emotion to control the political scene to the point that it happened in the white house, and in failing to realize that italy will be so sensitive in dealing with the issues that threatend its sovereignty. the misconception in addition to the american doubts for the italian policy towards the middle east as they consider it unbalanced and lenient with terrorism, and american distrust of Andreotti as the architect of these policies, all of these have produced an unhappy and sensitive mixture that will remain in the Italian memory for some time that have came as a major result of the Achille Lauro case(43)

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