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Jean Robert

ACHILLE LAURO: BRITISH INVOLVEMENT

1. We were a very minor player in the Achille Lauro affair; but on the military and intelligence side it looks as if we may have been involved peripherally in two or three respects, which I thought I should try to bring together in case we are ever faced with a similar situation in future.
2. You will remember that when the news first broke on 7 October of the Lauro's hijacking, the Italian Government requested, and we agreed to, the use by Italian military detachments of our base at Akrotiri. We likewise consented to a similar US request on 8 October. In both cases, we made two conditions; first, that there should be a publicity blackout, and second that we should be consulted in advance about any plans to use Akrotiri for a military operation against the ship.
3. It does seem in fact that the possibility of a military action was under serious consideration at one stage. Craxi himself confirmed in his speech in Parliament on October 17 that the US Ambassador Rabb called on him at lunchtime on 8 October to inform the Italians that the US proposed to take military action that night and "to carry it out alone should there be differences of opinion on its necessity". Craxi advocated caution, while not ruling out Italian participation in an attack on the ship. Shortly thereafter, the ship changed course and on 9 October was outside Port Said, at which point the Egyptians took over and, so far as we know, the Americans did not press further for an assault on the ship. I mention this because on 9 October we were asked in FCO telno 418 whether we had any reason to suppose that the Americans were contemplating military action; we replied, in two telegrams (Rome 843 and 844, but see also our 839, sent at 1600Z on 8 October) that our soundings led us to believe that this could by no means be excluded. So far as I know, the Americans never brought us into the picture. It may be, of course, that they did not intend to use Akrotiri to launch the operation, although geographically, with the ship off Syria, it must surely have been one of the possibilities that they had in mind.



4. Secondly, the press has reported, and so far as I know no one has contradicted, that the two C141 transport aircraft of the US Delta Force took off from Gibraltar to land at Sigonella on the night of October 11/12, with the intention of taking the hijackers onto the US. The Italians had authorised the US fighter interceptors to land at Sigonella, with the Egyptair aircraft, but had not expected the transport aircraft. I do not know whether this report about the take-off from Gibraltar is accurate, nor whether our agreement was sought or indeed was necessary.
5. Thirdly, I see from the October 26 edition of The Economist (page 62) that "the British picked up the radio signals [of the Egyptair flight that had just taken off from Cairo, with the hijackers and Abbas on board], from their listening station in Cyprus and relayed these signals to the US aircraft carrier Saratoga".
6. To complete the record, you will know that news of the Italian and US use of Akrotiri eventually leaked to the press, in part because the Italian helicopters sent to Cyprus travelled slowly through Greece and attracted publicity. But the Italian government behaved correctly, and in his speech Craxi simply referred to "the zone of operations".
7. There has been no criticism whatsoever in the press of our marginal involvement in the affair, and we know that the Italian Government were privately most appreciative of the help we offered at its very outset. But the whole question of the use to which the US is prepared to put its bases in Europe for an operation of this kind has now attracted a great deal of attention, not least I see from our own Labour party. (To be strictly correct, Sigonella is not a US base. It is an Italian airforce base containing a USN lodger unit.) There are also, no doubt, Spanish and Greek sensitivities to consider. In any future such US operation, the use of British bases or facilities in Cyprus (or Gibraltar) might conceivably become a rather more controversial issue and in a wider context than the Cypriot sensitivities which have concerned us in the past.
8. I write to ask whether any thought has been given to these aspects in the FCO or MOD. We shall presumably continue to be ready to make available our facilities, on a case by case basis, and provided that our conditions are met. But were we consulted by the Americans at any stage about the use of our facilities in Cyprus or (as it seems) Gibraltar? So far as this Embassy is concerned, there is also the question of possible retaliation by Arab terrorists to consider if ever our role became too overt.
9. May I leave it to you to copy this letter to anyone else who needs to see it?

Yours ever,
Tom

cc: G S Burton Esq, SCD, FCO
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