

Britain's Cyprus Plot Threatens Middle East Cold War

The British intelligence terrorism on Cyprus last week achieved a partial success in driving a wedge between Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization and thus pushing President Sadat toward an abandonment of his strategy for Palestinian "self-determination" by signing a separate peace with Israel. But, according to most observers, the Egyptians cannot afford to break with the PLO entirely or Sadat "would be overthrown in 24 hours," in the words of a high-level New York banking source.

The orchestrated riots and demonstrations against the Palestinians in Egypt, and the emotional, provocative speech by Sadat attacking the Palestinians as "assassins," have certainly boxed the Egyptian President further into a corner. The conspirators against Sadat, which include British and Israeli intelligence and a powerful faction inside Egypt itself linked to the daily *Al Akhbar* and Prime Minister Mamdouh Salem, intend to take advantage of the fact that Sadat's recent peace initiative has failed and inexorably drive the Egyptian President toward a separate deal.

The consequences of a bilateral Egypt-Israel pact, even if King Hussein of Jordan suicidally joins the deal, are widely recognized to be disastrous. A near-irreversible breach would be opened in the Arab world, pitting Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan against a "pro-Soviet" Arab bloc led by Syria, the PLO, Algeria, Libya, and others. In the view of a former Arab diplomat, the immediate consequence would be the eruption of an

expanded civil war in Lebanon, reflecting the Egypt-Israel alignment against Syria and the PLO. According to several reports, the Soviet Union — which just gave President Assad of Syria a military reception in Moscow — is prepared to back its allies with military force if necessary.

Saudi Arabia, politically aligned with the Rockefeller faction and John Connally in the United States, is terrified of the consequences of an Egypt-Israel pact. The Saudis, said a high State Department official, are not prepared to back Sadat in such a venture. Because of the immense influence wielded by the Saudis in both Egypt and Jordan, this official believed that it is virtually impossible for either Sadat or Hussein to go along with the plan.

Nevertheless, in Sadat's desperation there is no guarantee that the Egyptians might not lunge toward such a deal. Israel, under the influence of Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, is refusing to deal seriously with Egypt's demand for Palestinian "self-determination," and the United States has not shown sufficient sympathy for Sadat's plight. Further, Sadat's channels to the Arab world have been cut off at least since 1975.

The chaos that would result from such an act of desperation by Sadat, including his overthrow, would be worsened by an expected sharp rise in British intelligence-orchestrated guerrilla activity and terrorism throughout the entire eastern Mediterranean, including the Arab world, Cyprus, and Turkey.

The Larnaca-Sebai Affair

On Saturday, Feb. 18, Egypt's Youssef Sebai was gunned down in a Cyprus hotel during a meeting of the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) by two men later identified as Palestinians, one reportedly carrying an Iraqi passport and the other a Kuwaiti passport.

The two men had, oddly, spent *four days* in Cyprus before the assassination and had been seen at Cypriot nightclubs during the week. One was suspected of earlier involvement in the killing of leading Palestine Liberation Organization moderate Said Hammami in London last month.

At the hotel itself, security was remarkably lax, with at least 20 Cypriot security officials present failing to provide any meaningful protection for the meeting. This is especially noteworthy in view of the fact that Sebai's name had appeared on "hit lists" issued by extremist Palestinian rejectionist groups because of his qualified

support for Egyptian President Sadat's November trip to Jerusalem.

The *New York Times*, on Feb. 21, admitted the lack of security at the Nicosia Hilton:

The contention here (in Nicosia — ed.) that the Cypriots had mismanaged their response to the terrorists was supported by an Egyptian hostage who escaped at the outset of the incident and complained that security precautions had been sloppy at the Nicosia Hilton Hotel, where the shooting of Mr. Sebai took place . . .

He contended that Cypriot authorities, despite prior assurances, had provided almost no protection for Egyptian participants in the conference. After he was seized by the gunmen, he said he saw two Cypriots, presumably security men, start to pull pistols from their pockets and then decide not to intervene.

The interpreter . . . said he had bolted through a side door while the gunmen were marching the group from the conference room to a coffee shop. "The police didn't arrive at the hotel and start deploying around the building for at least 30 minutes after the shooting," he said.

DID EGYPTIAN INTELLIGENCE KNOW?

According to Greece's *Eleftherotypia* newspaper, Sebai had delivered a scathing attack on imperialism one hour before his assassination, including a call for unity among the Arab states and an implicit criticism of Sadat's diplomatic moves toward Israel.

This fact, plus the fact that Sebai was allowed to travel to Cyprus virtually unprotected by the Egyptian authorities despite the assassination threats against him, have led certain observers to surmise that tainted networks inside Egyptian intelligence played a key role in setting up his assassination. This point was explicitly made Feb. 21 in the Greek newspaper *Apogevmatini*:

The Cypriot government, according to information given to us, had serious suspicion that from the Egyptian side there was some kind of involvement in the assassination of Sebai, who was a close collaborator of Sadat but who remained till the end an ardent supporter of the Palestinian movement. He was pro-Soviet and was considered a successor of Sadat in the event of a change in the Egyptian policy.

Palestinian circles in Nicosia openly claim that the secret agencies of Egypt were the assassins of Sebai and not some Palestinian organization.

WHO WAS YOUSSEF SEBAI?

Before his recent role as an internal Egyptian opponent of a separate peace with Israel, Sebai had a long history as an Arab nationalist spokesman. In the early 1950s, he became a propagandist among the Egyptian intelligentsia for Nasser's Free Officer Corps after they seized power. By the latter 1950s, he was responsible for helping establish AAPSO as a spokesman organization for the Third World Nonaligned movement. Maintaining his ties into the East Bloc, and amongst the Egyptian intelligentsia during the early years of Sadat's rule in Egypt, Sebai was named Minister of Culture during the 1970s and later an editor for the Cairo newspaper *Al Ahram*.

PLO RESPONSE

As soon as news reached Beirut of the Sebai murder, PLO leader Yasser Arafat labeled the assassination "an act of treason against the Palestinian cause." The PLO officially offered to send a team of commandos to help capture the murderers and work out the release of hostages taken, but this was, for reasons still unexplained, not allowed by either the Lebanese or Cypriot authorities.

But the PLO *did* send a group of 17 leading PLO members to help with the negotiations, as was alluded to

by Cypriot President Kyprianou during a Feb. 21 press conference:

"There were no armed commandos," Kyprianou stressed, "but a Palestinian representation which arrived from Beirut on Saturday. The delegation was sent here by Mr. Arafat at the request of the Cypriot government in order to convince the two assassins to free the hostages and surrender."

Later, Arafat denounced "foreign intelligence services" for the Cyprus affair. The Italian newspaper *Il Giorno* reported that the terrorists were involved in Hammami's murder, for which the PLO explicitly blamed British intelligence and Scotland Yard.

A PLO spokesman reportedly linked the affair to the terrorist network supported by Iraq and led by Abu Nidal, a Fatah renegade in Baghdad. Abu Nidal, who reportedly has contact with top British terrorists Wadi Haddad and "Carlos," is thought to be a British agent and has been sentenced to death, *in absentia*, by a PLO court.

In Egypt, by early Feb. 19, British networks had already begun to organize the crowds in a far-from-spontaneous anti-Palestinian frenzy. Prime Minister Mamdouh Salem hastily blamed "the Palestinians" for the assassination, while mobs in Cairo chanted slogans like "Death to the Palestinians."

THE ROUTE THE TERRORISTS TOOK

After murdering Sebai, the two terrorists took 30 AAPSO delegates hostage, releasing 19 of them in exchange for safe conduct to Larnaca Airport. During the transfer of the terrorists and their prisoners from the Nicosia Hotel to Larnaca, security continued to be startlingly lax. On several occasions, the terrorists turned their backs to police standing close by, giving ample opportunity to the police to overtake them. However, the police did not make a move.

At Larnaca, the terrorists, with 11 hostages and a crew of four, took off with a commandeered Cyprus Airlines jet. The British interface in the commandeering of the plane was evidenced by the fact that the pilots of the plane were British nationals who had *volunteered* their services. The two Britons, Sam Melleng and Bill Cox, were reportedly "vacationing" in Cyprus.

The next stage of the scenario was clear: The terrorists would land in a Rejectionist Front country, opening the way for an Egyptian commando attack, Entebbe-style, into a neighboring Arab country. Such a catastrophic move would polarize the entire Arab world, isolating even further the already isolated Sadat and exacerbating tensions between Egypt and the Rejectionists — in particular, Syria.

The Arabs, however, refused to bite at this British scenario, and one-by-one closed their airports to the Cyprus Airlines jet. Libya refused landing rights to the plane, as did Kuwait, Somalia, Ethiopia, South Yemen, and Greece. Only Algeria offered landing rights, but then revoked permission, forcing the plane, now short of fuel after seven hours of flight, to land and refuel in Djibouti.

During the terrorists' 10-hour stay in Djibouti, plans to

launch a French commando raid against the terrorists in Djibouti were under active consideration, according to French intelligence sources. While in Djibouti, the terrorists notified the Cypriots that they would return to Cyprus to negotiate a safe passage to another country. Cypriot officials contacted Sadat, who then deployed Egyptian commando units to Djibouti. However, by the time the commandoes flew to Djibouti, the terrorists had already departed for Cyprus. The Egyptian commandoes then shadowed the plane to Larnaca and landed shortly after the terrorists touched down.

In a press conference later in Nicosia, President Kyprianou was asked about "the Egyptian plane that went to Djibouti first before landing in Cyprus." In response, Kyprianou said: "We also have the same information that indeed the Egyptian plane went to Djibouti. Why the operation did not take place in Djibouti but in Cyprus, I don't understand."

BLOODBATH AT LARNACA AIRPORT

While President Kyprianou and his officials were negotiating with the hostages at Larnaca, Egypt secretly set into motion the plan for a large-scale commando attack on the plane to free the hostages.

All the varied reports of the confusing events at the Larnaca airport make it clear that the Egyptian forces who attacked the plane acted entirely without the knowledge or permission of the Cyprus government. Therefore the Cypriots acted within their own national sovereignty in preventing the Egyptian action.

The Egyptians claimed that they had notified Cyprus that a commando squad was on its way to Cyprus to help capture the terrorists. But according to Cypriot officials, the Egyptians had said only that an Egyptian minister was traveling to Cyprus to help negotiate a release of the hostages, and when the Egyptian C-130 military plane arrived on Cyprus, a Cypriot minister went out to greet the plane—only to find it full of commandoes! President Kyprianou said later that at that point his government had specifically forbidden the Egyptians to disembark and carry out any military operations.

Later, in a speech in Egypt, President Sadat himself admitted that his government had not notified the Cypriots of the dispatch of the commandoes. The earlier reports had said that it was Prime Minister Mamdouh Salem who was handling the negotiations with the Cypriots at the time, implicating the Prime Minister in the conspiracy from the Egyptian side; Salem, as is well known, is an Interpol-connected police intelligence official.

Kyprianou was explicit on this matter:

"But, we had also the bloody events at Larnaca, which cost the lives of so many people. Never did the Cyprus government give its consent for the Egyptian action at Larnaca airport. On the contrary, in all our contacts we made it abundantly clear to the Egyptian representative that we banned any action by the armed group which had arrived at Larnaca without our consent. Unfortunately the action was taken despite the promises made to the contrary, and the government forces had to intervene with the well-known results."

Although initial press reports of the Larnaca affair indicated that the Egyptians had been gunned down in cold blood by Cypriot troops as they attempted to stage the rescue, it quickly became clear that this was not the case. It is certain that the Egyptians emerged firing from the C-130, and that many of their shots were wild, even striking the airport control tower where President Kyprianou had to take cover. Kyprianou and other officials on Cyprus announced later that at the point the Egyptians emerged from the plane, the terrorists were about to agree to surrender and were about to disembark.

At this point a British disinformation campaign was launched to obscure the events at Larnaca. Here is a report on the Larnaca affair from a high-level U.S. intelligence source:

"The British are involved in the affair. The presence of British government officials and press people, as well as the British interface with layers of the Cypriot armed forces, corroborate this.

The Cypriots were the first to fire. They had numerous vehicles in the vicinity of the Egyptian commando plane. They moved up to the nose of the plane and began firing with 50-caliber machine guns. The reports that there was a PLO commando unit fighting alongside the Cypriots is totally contrived.

The deputy chief of police, Stavros Stokkos, was primarily responsible for controlling the operation. He was arrested

fiasco. The order to open fire on the Egyptians came from the radio tower and whoever was in charge of the operational command. The prime suspect is Vassos Lyssarides.

Kyprianou thought he would be negotiating with the Egyptian Minister of Information, who was supposed to be on the Egyptian commando plane but wasn't. Numerous telephone calls from Sadat and Egyptian War Minister Gamassi to Kyprianou indicated that the Egyptians would supply military assistance; however, communication problems between the Cypriots and Egyptians were enormous.

The entire operation, from the assassination of the Egyptian journalist to the shoot-out at the airport, was a set-up and a trap. The British were actively present: five British journalists were arrested by the Cypriot government for interfering with the Cypriot police. They were, in the main, providing disinformation and causing a great deal of confusion.

With the ignominious collapse of the Egyptian commando effort, it is likely that Egyptian intelligence networks will conduct operations against the Cypriot government. This could create a tremendous rift in relations among all Arab governments and destabilize the region. Overall, Sadat appears to be conforming to profile...."

KYPRIANOU CLEANS UP

After the affair was over, Kyprianou cracked down on a network of British agents in the Cypriot security forces and the press that had aided British intelligence in the

operation, as the following report from the *Washington Post* Feb. 23 says:

Cypriot President Spyros Kyprianou...suspended Cyprus' deputy police chief, Pavlos Stokkos, "for communicating false information regarding the events at Larnaca Airport and for negligence in the execution of his duties."

The Cypriot government also arrested John Bierman, a British foreign correspondent based in Cyprus, and formally charged him with publishing a false report relating to the Larnaca Airport battle.

Bierman, in an eyewitness dispatch to the Reuters news agency, had reported seeing a Greek Cypriot officer, while driving an Egyptian soldier at gunpoint toward the terminal building where dozens of foreign reporters and cameramen were watching, fire "two shots at the Egyptian, who fell, apparently badly wounded."

The role of the "vacationing" British pilots of the plane was revealed in several commentaries. First, the pilots spread reports, unconfirmed by other sources, that PLO official Abu Maizar was "fraternizing" with the terrorists aboard the plane during the negotiations, despite the strong PLO condemnations of the assassination and hijack.

A Somali hostage later told the press that, in fact, *the pilots themselves had cooperated with the terrorists and had returned weapons to the terrorists during the siege!*

But most damaging were the reports that PLO troops had taken part in the attack on the Egyptian commandoes, a report calculated to provoke a deep split in PLO-Egyptian relations. Apparently the pilots, again, were a key source for these rumors, spread in particular by the *Washington Post*.

In contrast to other press accounts of the fighting at Larnaca airport, and despite denials by President Kyprianou, the *Washington Post* has continued to insist that Palestinian forces participated in the assault against the Egyptian commandoes. Excerpts pertaining to the alleged PLO participation at Larnaca follow:

Washington Post, Feb. 22:

An elite squad of armed Palestinian guerrillas fought alongside Greek Cypriot National Guard forces in Sunday night's gun battle in which an Egyptian commando force was decimated at Larnaca airport, well-informed sources said today.

The Palestinians' participation in the Larnaca airport battle is likely to further increase tension between Cyprus and Egypt.

The Palestinians' exact role at Larnaca airport and the number of casualties they may have inflicted on the Egyptians were not immediately clear.

But the sudden appearance of the unexpected opposition clearly worsened the Egyptians' disarray, according to foreign pilots watching the battle at close quarters....

The government also contends that the PLO men arrived here unarmed, yet news photographs show identifiable PLO members with their familiar Soviet-made Kalashnikovs. This classic guerrilla weapon is also

a favorite among the private militia of Cypriot Socialist leader Vassos Lyssarides, whose followers were also seen at the airport.

Washington Post, Feb. 23:

Washington Post special correspondent Joseph Fitchett reported from Nicosia Tuesday that well-informed sources said that a squad of armed Palestinian commandos had fought alongside the Greek Cypriot National Guard.

The Cypriot government yesterday termed the report "malicious and totally untrue," and said "there were no Palestinian commandoes at Larnaca Airport."

The Washington Post stands by Fitchett's report.

New York Times, Feb. 23:

The role of Mr. Arafat's Palestinian representatives remained unclear. There have been reports that they fought with the Cypriots against the Egyptians. Interviews with a dozen witnesses failed to produce one who had actually seen any Palestinians firing guns.

Mr. Michaelides, the Cypriot Speaker, said that (Arafat's) Palestinian (representatives) had arrived (from Beirut) unarmed.

Mr. (Christodoulos) Benjamin, the Interior Minister, said that even if the Palestinians had obtained guns later, they could not have fired them at the Egyptians.

"All civilians, including the Palestinians, were in the terminal area and between them and the Egyptians was a line of National Guardsmen," he said. "The Palestinians would have had to shoot through our troops to fire at the Egyptians, and they would have turned around and shot back."

According to U.S. intelligence sources, Lyssarides, who is also chairman of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization and who headed up negotiations with the terrorists, is suspected of direct involvement in setting up the Cyprus terrorist affair. It is significant to note that Lyssarides was not trusted by former Cypriot President Archbishop Makarios in the final months of his life. Lyssarides is also distrusted and despised by the Cypriot Communist Party (AKEL).

CYPRIOU PRESIDENT ON PLO

Kyprianou himself responded to the charges of PLO involvement in the affair at his press conference later in the week:

Q: Were there any other armed commandoes in the Larnaca airport who collaborated with the Cypriot government?

Kyprianou: There were no armed commandoes, but a Palestinian representative who arrived from Beirut the previous day, that is on Saturday (Feb. 18—ed.). The delegation was sent here by Mr. Arafat at the request of the Cypriot government in order to convince the two assassins to free the hostages and surrender.

Q: Are the reports by a foreign news agency (Reuters-ed.)

that national guardsmen executed some Egyptian commandoes in cold blood accurate?

K: Those reports are totally untrue. The subject, however, will be investigated by the police authorities in order to find out which reporters provided the reports.

Q: Mr. President, how do you explain the fact that two high-level Egyptian officers arrived in Cyprus last Saturday to lead the commando attack and do you consider this an orchestrated plot against the Cypriot government?

K: The fact that two responsible officers arrived in Cyprus the previous day, that is Saturday, meant that they knew something about what was going to happen in Cyprus on Sunday. I don't want to reach any conclusions but I would like to underline that this subject is added in the various questions which need to be answered.

Q: Mr. President, to what extent were the events of Sunday part of a broader provocation plan to hurt the Cyprus issue as well as the relations between Cyprus and the Arab world?

K. There is no evidence to justify such a conclusion. Nothing can be excluded, however, in this kind of affair.

SADAT BREAKS DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH CYPRUS

Immediately after the bloody shootout on Sunday, Feb. 19, in which 15 Egyptian commandos were killed and 14 others wounded, Cypriot President Kyprianou made a personal appeal to Egyptian President Sadat urging him to meet with him in an effort to restore relations between the two countries. "I would like to appeal to President Sadat to do his best to calm down the atmosphere in his country and to try, with me, to restore the old relations and the old friendship," Kyprianou said. At the same time the Cypriot leader made it understood that he holds the Egyptians responsible for the bloodshed since he had agreed with Sadat himself that the rescue of the hostages and the arrest of the two terrorists would be left to the Cypriots.

On Wednesday, Feb. 22, the Egyptian government, ignoring Kyprianou's appeals, officially announced that it had ended diplomatic relations with Cyprus and that Kyprianou is no longer recognized as the President of the Cypriot Republic. Sadat reacted to a controlled environment, calling Kyprianou a "dwarf", and after the funeral of the killed commandoes, he said that "Kyprianou must pay the price for the treacherous

decision which resulted in the martyrdom of my sons."

President of Cyprus Kyprianou in an announcement Feb. 24 sa

"Sadat's strong feelings and his present justifiable psychological state," and added that "I wish to express once again the profound and sincere desire of the Cyprus people to maintain the closest and friendliest relations with Egypt."

THE OUTLOOK FOR MEDITERRANEAN PEACE

Coming on the eve of the March 10 Karamanlis-Ecevit summit to discuss a resolution of the Cyprus problem, Sadat's decision to sever relations with Cyprus and most importantly withdraw his recognition of Spyros Kyprianou as the legitimate president of the island republic, threatens to fuel Turkish intransigence. Thus, the chances for a renewed crisis and superpower confrontation in the eastern Mediterranean have been heightened.

Already the leader of the Turkish community in Cyprus Rauf Denktash, who also does not recognize Kyprianou, praised Sadat's decision and said that Egypt is welcome to move its embassy from the Greek to the Turkish sector in the island. A Cypriot diplomat warned of the possibility of a wave of terrorism being set off in Cyprus in "reprisal" of Kyprianou's handling of the Larnaca affair.

The Greek press reports that Sadat's hard-line posture vis-a-vis Cyprus is blocking initiatives taken by Greek Prime Minister Karamanlis, United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, Yugoslav President Tito and French President Giscard d'Estaing to mediate restoration of relations between Cyprus and Egypt. Egyptian officials in the Foreign Ministry were taken by surprise by Sadat's hasty decision and expressed hopes to repair relations with Cyprus, one of Egypt's closest friends in the Mediterranean, in the coming weeks. "Sadat seems to be in a brook-no-challenge mood right now," one senior official said. "He is ready, just out of sheer frustration over Israeli intransigence in the negotiations, I think, to strike out every which way, hitting friends as well as enemies."

According to the *Washington Post*, Greek Premier Constantine Karamanlis appealed to both sides to clear up the "misunderstandings." He said it was "evident that both governments became involved in an adventure because of events beyond their control."