

40 years since the hijacking of the Achille Lauro: when Italy said NO to the United States

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At **1:00 PM on Monday, October 7, 1985**, the cruise ship **Achille Lauro**, pride of the Italian merchant navy, was peacefully sailing in Egyptian territorial waters. Twenty-four thousand tons, two hundred meters long, Italian flag. On board were **107 passengers** and **320 crew members**. Another **670 tourists** were on land, engaged in a guided tour of Cairo. Their return was scheduled for the evening, at Port Said.

After Egypt, the next destination was **Ashdod, in Israel**. But the Achille Lauro would never reach Israel. What was supposed to be a pleasure trip would turn into an international drama that would test the Italian government and relations with the United States.

Italy in 1985: between balance and international tensions

At that time, the Prime Minister was **Bettino Craxi**, in office for two years at Palazzo Chigi. At the Quirinale, for a few months, **Francesco Cossiga**. At the Farnesina, **Giulio Andreotti**, an experienced and prudent figure, a man of relationships and balance.

Italy was experiencing a phase of strong diplomatic tension between two worlds: on one side the Atlantic alliance, on the other the dialogue with the Middle East and Arab countries.

The boarding: four men change history

At **1:07 PM**, while passengers were having lunch in the dining room, four men armed with **Kalashnikovs** suddenly burst in. Gunshots tore through the air, screams mixed with chaos. A bullet hit a sailor in the leg. Within minutes, the ship was completely in the hands of the hijackers.

They were **four Palestinian militants**, one of whom was a minor, belonging to the **Palestine Liberation Front (PLF)**, a faction of the PLO. They had boarded in Genoa with **false Hungarian and Greek passports**. Their goal was to carry out an attack in the Israeli port of **Ashdod**, but discovered by the crew while handling weapons, they decided to change their plan and take control of the ship.

The first hours of the hijacking

The radio operator managed to send a desperate radio message:

> *Mayday, mayday, Achille Lauro. We have been hijacked by an unspecified number of Palestinians. They demand the release of fifty of their comrades detained in Israel.*

The signal was picked up in Gothenburg, Sweden. It was the first official alarm. At **5:00 PM** the news reached the **Farnesina**. Giulio Andreotti convened the crisis unit, while the Minister of Defense **Giovanni Spadolini**, informed in Milan, ordered the immediate alert of the Armed Forces. Italy moved on two fronts: the diplomatic route, embodied by Andreotti, and the line of military firmness, supported by Spadolini.

The decisive hours: diplomacy or force?

On the evening of October 7, at the Farnesina headquarters, Andreotti opened diplomatic channels. He contacted the Egyptian **Boutros Boutros-Ghali**, who guaranteed cooperation, and the Palestinian leader **Yasser Arafat**, who officially distanced himself from the terrorist action. Meanwhile, at **Castelporziano**, President Cossiga was constantly informed.

Spadolini, having returned to Rome, gathered the military leaders and tasked the Special Forces with preparing for an armed intervention. **Operation Margherita** was born: the **Teseo Tesei Group** of COMSUBIN was embarked on the ship “Vittorio Veneto”, while four helicopters with **60 commandos from the 9th Battalion “Col Moschin”** took off from Livorno.

But the military action proved too risky: the Americans pushed for an attack, Craxi and Andreotti insisted on the path of negotiation.

Abul Abbas enters the scene

During the night, Yasser Arafat personally called Bettino Craxi and communicated the dispatch of two envoys to negotiate the terrorists' surrender. One of them was **Abul Abbas**, leader of the Palestine Liberation Front. An ambiguous man, divided between diplomacy and militancy, with a history of attacks in Israel and Europe.

While Italian reconnaissance identified the ship, the terrorists requested to dock in Syria, at the port of **Tartus**. Andreotti called the Syrian President **Hafez al-Assad**, who initially agreed, but then withdrew permission under American pressure. The **Achille Lauro** remained stranded at sea, surrounded by diplomatic tensions.

The murder of Leon Klinghoffer

Frustrated and isolated, the terrorists tried to distinguish the passengers by nationality. Among them, a man in a wheelchair: **Leon Klinghoffer**, sixty-nine years old, American Jew, on board with his wife to celebrate their anniversary. He was the chosen victim.
He was dragged onto the deck, shot twice, and thrown into the sea.

The news of the murder spread slowly. For hours, the Italian authorities were unaware of what had happened. The commander **De Rosa**, threatened, declared that “all passengers are well”, allowing the negotiation to continue.

The surrender and diplomatic deception

On October 9, the Achille Lauro anchored off **Port Said**, in Egypt. Thanks to the mediation of Abul Abbas and the Egyptian government, the terrorists agreed to lay down their arms in exchange for a safe conduct. The Italian ambassador **Vincenzo Migliuolo** signed the agreement. Italy thought no one had died.

But a few hours later, American intelligence intercepted communications: **Klinghoffer had been killed**. Craxi learned the news only after the negotiation was concluded. It was too late: the four hijackers had been taken into custody by the Egyptians and were about to leave Egypt aboard a Boeing 737 of **EgyptAir**, along with **Abul Abbas** and the PLO mediators.

Sigonella: Italy says no

On the evening of **October 10**, two American F-14 fighters intercepted the Egyptian plane and forced it to land at the **NATO base in Sigonella**, Sicily.

It was the beginning of the **most serious crisis between Italy and the United States since World War II**.

As soon as it landed, the plane was surrounded by Italian military from the **Vigilanza Aeronautica Militare (VAM)**. A few minutes later, the **Delta Force** from the United States, arriving with two C-141s, surrounded the Italians in turn. A surreal scene: weapons pointed, soldiers against soldiers, allies looking each other in the eyes in silence.

General **Ercolano Annichiarico**, commander of the base, positioned the means to defend the Egyptian Boeing. Craxi, informed, ordered: *“The plane is under Italian jurisdiction. No one sets foot on it without authorization.”*

For hours, the tension remained extremely high. Reagan asked Craxi to hand over the terrorists and Abul Abbas. Craxi replied: *“The crimes were committed on an Italian ship, the jurisdiction is ours.”*

It was the **first time in republican history** that Italy openly opposed the United States.

In the end, on the night between **October 10 and 11**, after a very harsh verbal confrontation, Reagan accepted Rome's decision. The Delta Force withdrew. The four hijackers were arrested

and handed over to Italian justice. Abul Abbas remained on board the Egyptian plane, which was granted permission to take off for **Rome**, then **Fiumicino**, and finally for **Belgrade**, where he would find refuge.

The trial and the legacy of Sigonella

In **1986**, the **Genoa Court** sentenced **Abul Abbas** to life imprisonment as the instigator of the Achille Lauro hijacking and the murder of **Leon Klinghoffer**. The same sentence was imposed on two of the four hijackers, while the fourth, a minor at the time of the events, received a sentence of **17 years in prison**.

In **1987**, the Genoa Court of Appeal confirmed all the sentences. In the following years, one of those responsible for Klinghoffer's murder escaped during a temporary leave and was later **arrested in Spain**, to be extradited back to Italy.

The Palestinian leader **Abul Abbas**, who had taken refuge in Baghdad under the protection of **Saddam Hussein's** regime, was captured in **2003** by US special forces during the Iraq war. He died the following year, in **2004**, in an American prison near Baghdad.

On the political level, the handling of the crisis caused **strong tensions within the Italian government**. The Republican ministers, led by **Giovanni Spadolini**, resigned, but the crisis was resolved in a few days.

On **October 19, 1985**, a personal letter from US President **Ronald Reagan** to **Bettino Craxi** — known as *“Dear Bettino”* — helped officially mend diplomatic relations between **Rome and Washington**, reaffirming cooperation between the two countries in the fight against international terrorism.

Forty years later, the Achille Lauro incident and the **Sigonella crisis** remain one of the most significant episodes in Italian post-war history, an example of how complex and delicate the international balances of the time were.