

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: September 3, 1969

SUBJECT: TWA Hijacking

PARTICIPANTS: Charles Tillinghast, Chairman of the Board, TWA
Tom Huntington, Vice President, TWA
Frank E. Loy, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Transportation and Telecommunications, E

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E/TT
NEA - Mr. Davies
NEA/ARN - Mr. Seelye
EUR/AIS - Mr. Beaudry

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I had attempted to reach Mr. Wiser, TWA's President, to get a firsthand report of his trip to Damascus. Mr. Wiser is on his way back to the US and was not available. Consequently, I spoke in separate conversation, to Mr. Tillinghast who had had a long conversation with Mr. Wiser, and to Mr. Huntington, in Paris, who had accompanied Mr. Wiser. The following emerged:

The ranking person to whom Messrs. Wiser and Huntington spoke was General Akil who is Syria's Vice Minister of Defense and Director General of Civil Aviation, and the Chairman of the Syrian Arab Airline. It was their impression that Akil was both very well informed on the matter and very influential in the Syrian Government on this issue. The next level up would be the Premier.

The Syrians believe that they have acted both rather responsibly and humanely by letting the four Israeli women depart. They intend to hold the two Israeli men for a trade for the two Syrian military pilots that landed in Israel by mistake. They recognize, and are concerned about adverse international public opinion in this regard, but they think they can do no other. They point out that while the two Syrian pilots were military they were not on a military mission but rather some sort of training mission. Mr. Wiser did not believe any step was at

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present being considered by the Syrians, other than the trade.

The two hijackers were in jail, under military custody. The TWA officers doubted that they would either be tried publicly or released. They assumed that the hijackers would simply fade from view. This was more speculation, rather than a view based on any special information.

Akil said that neither the hijackers nor the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine would get anything out of this. In fact, the latter organization had asked the Syrians to get some of their members released from Israel, but the Syrians had said no.

Dr. Romano, the Italian Charge in Damascus, had acted very well, but he was near collapse and was basically not nearly so strong or forceful as the Italian Ambassador. TWA was very glad to see the latter return.

Romano said at one point that it was too bad the former Soviet Ambassador to Damascus (who is at present the Ambassador to Chad) was no longer there. If he had been, Romano thought all six Israelis would have been released promptly.

The two Israeli male passengers were in jail under Army custody. Their case, it was said, was under investigation. Mr. Huntington said he hoped he would press either the Italians or the International Red Cross to visit these two. There is a great deal of concern in Israel about Syrian prison conditions and Mr. Huntington said he had heard from several quarters that there is nothing worse than a Syrian prison. In the past prisoners who had been there for two months or so had emerged somewhat mentally deranged.

In this connection, Mr. Huntington said that in Rome Israeli Charge Yosha had asked Mr. Wiser to tell the TWA Captain to try to see the prisoners. Mr. Wiser said he would take this under consideration. Wells Stabler apparently said it might be better not to do so if we could arrange to have the Italians or the Red Cross take on this job.

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