

October 13, 1985

HOSTAGES AS AND HIJACKERS: AN ALLY OF ARAFAT; PALESTINIAN GUERRILLA: MAN OF MANY FACTIONS

By RONALD SMOTHERS

Mohammed Abbas, the Palestinian guerrilla leader sought by the United States in connection with the cruise ship hijacking, is a man in his early 40's who has been a key strategist within the faction-ridden Palestinian guerrilla forces.

Using the code name Abul Abbas, the mustachioed, broad-shouldered 6-footer has been an active Palestinian guerrilla since 1965, when he joined a small, Jordan-based group called Vengeance.

Last month he was chosen secretary general of an anti-Syrian faction of the Palestine Liberation Front at the group's meeting in Tunis.

He and his faction are allied with the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasir Arafat. But in the last 10 years, his loyalties have shifted among various Jordanian, Syrian, Libyan and Iraqi-backed guerrilla groups as the fortunes of the Palestinian cause have risen and fallen.

Israeli officials have attributed to him the planning and organizing a 1979 raid on Nahariya in northern Israel by a four-man Palestine Liberation Front force. Four Israelis, including two children, were killed in that raid. Personal supervision Mr. Abbas, who always carries a black attache case when he travels, is said to dislike delegating authority and consequently has personally supervised much of his group's activity.

He is believed by Israel to have personally planned the hijacking of the Achille Lauro, not for the purposes of hijacking the ship, but to get members of his group to the Israeli port of Ashdod, a scheduled stop on the ship's route.

Born in Palestine, Mr. Abbas is said by those familiar with him to have spent his early years in Jordan, where in 1965 he joined Vengeance, a small group organization by Ahmed Jibril, a Palestinian who was then a captain in the Syrian armed forces.

The group's main purpose was to engage Israel on Israeli soil, but by 1968 it had merged with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The Popular Front, under Dr. George Habash and Dr. Wadi Haddad, specialized in "foreign operations." In 1968 they staged the first Palestinian airline hijacking, seizing an El Al plane and forcing it to land in Algiers.

A year later, the Popular Front split into three factions. Mr. Abbas went with Mr. Jibril, who established the Jordanian-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, and was soon elected to the group's executive committee. He and Mr. Jibril were forced to flee to Syria in 1970 after the Government of Jordan cracked down on Palestinian guerrilla forces in the country.

Group Moved to Beirut

The group soon moved its operations to Beirut. After Mr. Jibril established close relations with the Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Popular Front-General Command began to benefit from financial and

weapons aid from Libya.

When the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, Mr. Abbas was placed in charge of the group's crack units stationed in downtown Beirut and charged with harrying the Christian Phalangist militia. In this period, Mr. Abbas emerged in the eyes of many Lebanese as the man responsible for much of the destruction of the old part of Beirut and its waterfront.

But the next year, with the Syrian entrance into the war-torn city, Mr. Abbas was forced to shift his loyalties again. In violation of Mr. Jebril's orders, he and his small group fought with Syrian Army forceS, as did Mr. Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization.

Eventually, Mr. Abbas's followers and others loyal to Mr. Jebril fought violently among themselves within the Palestinian districts in Beirut and Tripoli, and Mr. Abbas was expelled from the Popular Front-General Command.

Liberation Front Established

The development drove Mr. Abbas into an alliance with Mr. Arafat and also opened the door for getting money for his small group from Iraq, which had been critical of both Syria and Libya. With Iraqi assistance, he eventually helped set up the small Palestine Liberation Front with a former teacher and Palestinian leader, Dr. Talaat Yacoub.

In addition to the Nahariya raid in 1979, tHe group reportedly tried several daring but unsuccessful assaults over the Israel-Lebannon border. Mr. Abbas's group is said to have tried at one time to use a hotair balloon and at another time a hanG flider to evade the electronic fence that Israel had put up at the border.

With the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in August 1982 and the withdrawal of Palestinian guerrillas from West Beirut, Mr. Abbasd, then deputy secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Front, fled to Baghdad.

In 1983, when the P.L.O. and Mr. Arafat's leadership were seriously challenged by Syrian-backed guerrilla factions, Mr. Abbas split completely from Dr. Yacoub. Mr. Abbas called his former ally "a puppet on a Syrian string" and was in turn attacked as an "Arafat lackey" and renegade.

Recognition From Arafat

Last November, Mr. Abbas and his small faction of the Palestine Liberation Front were given some legitimacy when Mr. Arafat named him to the group's executive committee at a meeting of the Palestine National Council.

It was the first public recognition of Mr. Abbas's role in the guerrilla movement, and as part of the P.L.O. executive structure he moved his headquarters to Tunis, where Mr. Arafat was based. It was there last month that he was given the top leadership position in his faction of the Palestine Liberation Front.