[T]hough the [SUA] Convention represents a commitment to the prevention of unlawful acts, it is ultimately up to the signatory states themselves to make the treaty work, and it remains to be seen how states will apply the Convention in the absence of an enforcement mechanism.

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International Agreements - Convention and Protocol from the International Conference on the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation,

**TERROR GOES TO SEA: ACHILLE LAURO AND THE ORIGINS OF THE 1988 SUA CONVENTION**

On October 7, 1985, four heavily armed members of the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), a faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), hijacked the Achille Lauro, an Italian-flag cruise ship, while sailing from Alexandria to Port Said, Egypt. The four Palestinians boarded the Achille Lauro in Genoa, Italy, managing to smuggle on board automatic weapons, grenades and other explosives, and intending to stay aboard as passengers until the cruise liner reached Ashdod, Israel. In Israel, they “planned either to shoot up the harbor or take Israelis
The Palestinians intended to hold the Israelis as hostages to bargain for the release of 50 Palestinians held in Israeli jails.

The four PLO members aborted their plans and seized the ship when the crew discovered their weapons after the Achille Lauro left Alexandria. Although it is not clear whether the initial seizure was on the high seas or within the territorial waters of Egypt, there is no doubt that the ship was on the high seas while being held by the hijackers. While holding the ship’s crew and passengers hostage, the hijackers threatened to kill the passengers unless Israel released 50 Palestinian prisoners. They also threatened to blow up the ship if anyone attempted a rescue mission.

On the afternoon of October 8, 1985, Israel not having met their demands, the hijackers shot Leon Klinghoffer, a Jewish U.S. national who was partly paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. Thereafter, the hijackers threw Mr. Klinghoffer’s body and wheelchair overboard at sea.

After a series of failed negotiations between the PLF and West Germany, Italy, and Egypt, the Achille Lauro arrived in Port Said, Egypt. Egypt negotiated the release of the hostages and took the terrorists into custody, but did not actually arrest them. Despite repeated U.S. requests to prosecute the offenders, Egypt resisted. On October 10, 1985, an airliner chartered by the Egyptian government sought to deliver the Palestinians to Tunis, Tunisia. Under U.S. pressure, Tunisia did not allow the aircraft to land. U.S. Navy fighters eventually forced the aircraft down at a NATO airfield in Sicily where a dispute arose between U.S. and Italian authorities over which government had jurisdiction. When U.S. troops surrounded the airliner, Italian troops surrounded the Americans, resulting in a tense standoff. Subsequently, the American and Italian governments agreed to allow the Italian forces to take custody of the hijackers, including Mohammed Abbas, the group’s leader and a known terrorist. The Italian government prosecuted the hijackers but refused to detain (or extradite) Abbas. Abbas traveled to Yugoslavia, South Yemen, and eventually to Iraq, which denied extradition. Remaining at large until April 2003, a U.S. special operations team captured Abbas in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In 1986, in response to the hijacking of the Achille Lauro, Egypt, Austria, and Italy proposed at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to create a new international convention, modeled on existing anti-terrorism conventions, particularly the Hague and Montreal Conventions against airplane hijacking and sabotage, and the Hostage Convention, to deal specifically with the issue of maritime terrorism. In November 1986,