

ARTICLE APPROVED
ON PAGE A7NEW YORK TIMES
7 May 1986

FILE ONLY

STAT

ARAB'S INTERVIEW STIRS NEWS DEBATE

By PETER J. BOYER

An agreement made by NBC News to keep secret the whereabouts of a terrorist suspect in exchange for an interview has stirred a debate within the press and Government over the propriety of the arrangement.

A State Department official, Robert B. Oakley, said yesterday that the deal made NBC an accomplice to terrorism.

On Monday night, the "NBC Nightly News" broadcast a three-and-a-half-minute interview with Mohammed Abbas, who is under indictment in the United States as the mastermind of a hijacking in which Leon Klinghoffer, an American, was killed last October. He is also being sought by Italian authorities.

Mr. Klinghoffer was a passenger aboard the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro when it was hijacked in an operation for which American authorities say Mr. Abbas was responsible. The State Department is offering a \$250,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and prosecution of Mr. Abbas, who is also known as Abul Abbas.

Location Not Disclosed

In the NBC interview, conducted by a London-based correspondent, Henry Champ, at an undisclosed location and repeated yesterday on the NBC News program "Today," Mr. Abbas threatened actions against Americans within United States borders and called President Reagan "enemy No. 1."

"Terrorism thrives on this kind of publicity," a State Department spokesman, Charles E. Redman, said at a briefing yesterday in Washington. He added that such publicity "encourages the terrorist activities we're all seeking to deter."

But the harshest criticism against NBC was not over the interview itself, but over the deal for silence that NBC made with Mr. Abbas.

In Tokyo, Mr. Oakley, head of the State Department's counterterrorism unit, said in an interview with Cable News Network that when news organizations make such arrangements, they are saying, "We've become his accomplices in order to give him publicity."

'Pledge of Silence and Complicity'

"They take the pledge of silence and complicity, which we think is rather strange and unacceptable," Mr. Oakley added.

Lawrence K. Grossman, president of NBC News, defended the interview and said he was "dismayed" by the State Department criticism. "I don't know how State on the one hand criticizes the Soviet Union for failing to report the news they don't like about the nuclear accident at Chernobyl and on the other hand suggests that we refrain from broadcasting news that we don't like," he said.

"Abbas is a newsmaker, and we went after him hammer and tong," Mr. Grossman added. "Everybody went after him. We'd like to interview all leaders. I think it's important for the American people to understand and be informed and to make their own judgments."

There was disagreement in the press over the propriety of NBC's arrangement. Neither CBS nor ABC would comment on the matter, although one ABC executive said that network's guidelines would have prevented such an agreement.

But Charles Osgood, a CBS commentator, strongly criticized NBC's report in a radio broadcast yesterday morning. "The news media must be independent, must not be government controlled," Mr. Osgood said, "but perhaps we should not let Abul Abbas and his kind call the shots, either."

'Some Competitive Envy'

Timothy J. Russert, a vice president of NBC News, said of such criticism, "I do sense some competitive envy at work here."

Mr. Russert said that "everybody was attempting to get an interview with Abbas, print and electronic journalists."

But Warren Hoge, foreign editor of The New York Times, said The Times had a recent opportunity to publish an interview with Mr. Abbas, with similar conditions attached and turned it down.

"Our feeling was that this was a man who was being sought for murder and that we simply would not go along with an arrangement whereby we would not disclose where he was if we knew where he was," Mr. Hoge said. "Also, the most important news was his whereabouts. Not being able to say where he was was just unacceptable."

George Cotliar, managing editor of The Los Angeles Times, said newspaper might agree not to disclose an individual's whereabouts under some circumstances, "but not in the case of Abbas; I think that's a little much."

But Ed Turner, executive vice president of Cable News Network, defended the NBC report. "If NBC can find him and get his views, that's part of newsgathering," Mr. Turner said. "We're not in the business of reporting chamber of commerce handouts. I wish we had him."