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Hijacker's claimed link to Sunni group doubted

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WASHINGTON — One of the hijackers of the Pan American World Airways airliner in Karachi last week has informed Pakistani officials that he belongs to an obscure pro-Syrian Sunni Moslem group based in Lebanon, American sources said yesterday.

But they hastened to add that both they and the Pakistanis suspect that the admission is false, aimed at masking the identity of the terrorist organization that supported the hijacking.

"So far he's the only one of the four in custody who has talked," one official said. "We think he's providing the cover story that was worked out in advance in case they were captured.

"But the Pakistanis are practiced in the ungentle arts of interrogation, and, in time, it wouldn't be surprising if they have fulsome accounts from all four of the hijackers."

The presumption of US and other Western intelligence analysts, officials said, is that the hijack was so well planned and so brutal that it has the earmarks of an operation by the Abu Nidal terrorist organization.

Officials said if a clear account of who was behind the mission is ascertained, it still may be very difficult to carry out retribution. They speculated that actions could range from a covert mission against the headquarters of the organization to economic and diplomatic pressures against governments that allow the group to train and operate on their territory.

For example, they point out that Abu Nidal has offices both in Libya and Syria and conducts training in Libya and in the Syr-

ian-controlled Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.

After the Abu Nidal organization was implicated in the fatal shootings at the Rome and Vienna airports last December, the United States put pressure on Syrian President Hafez Assad to close down the group's operations in his country. "But Assad insisted he didn't know where Abu Nidal was and that his office in Damascus was only used for public relations, not operational planning," one official said.

The trouble with bombs

Another said that if Abu Nidal was fingered in the Pan Am case and even if the United States knew the exact address of his offices in the Libyan capital of Tripoli, it could not bomb for fear of killing innocent civilians in the vicinity. It is in that connection that one planner talked of the possibility of a covert raid by a special American military team aimed at capturing key operatives and bringing them to trial.

Sources said Abu Nidal is not believed to have his own training facilities in Libya but to use, on an ad hoc basis, Libyan terrorist training sites.

On the other hand, they said, the Israelis have bombed training facilities in Bekaa believed to be used primarily by his organization.

Israeli sources said they suspect Abu Nidal might have been behind both the Karachi hijacking and the shootings at an Istanbul synagogue. Both were extremely well planned and almost casually bloody. In the case of the hijacking, the men had blue security force uniforms and entered the airfield using a truck that closely resembled a security vehicle. And in Istanbul, the raiders struck a synagogue on the morning it reopened after six weeks of repair.

The Israelis suggest that Abu Nidal, a renegade former ally of Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization, might be attempting to assume a greater leadership role over the PLO by demonstrating that he can achieve dramatic results with force while Arafat's effort at pursuing the diplomatic track with Jordan has been woefully ineffectual.

Rumors of death

American analysts say they are not even sure that Abu Nidal, whose real name is Sabri Khalil al-Banna, is still alive; it is conceivable, they say, that rumors of his death are accurate and his work is being carried out by a tight circle of associates.

His main base of operations was in Iraq from the early 1970s until the early 1980s, when he was expelled from Baghdad, sources said. During those years, he frequently carried out operations against Syria, Iraq's long-standing rival.

Shifting his operations from Baghdad to Damascus, he then was used in part to back Syria's efforts to pressure Jordan and the PLO not to participate in the Middle East peace process, the sources said.

Starting in mid-1984, he began shifting his base to Libya, the sources said. "There is evidence of heavy Libyan financing of his operations," one official declared.

But even though senior officials conceded there has been a sudden flood of intelligence reports suggesting new Libyan-supported terrorism in recent weeks, they have no evidence that Libya, or in fact any government, was behind the Pan Am and Istanbul atrocities.

"We need a lot more information before we can consider doing anything," one planner said.