

US probe of EgyptAir crash: media brands Arab doubts as "wild speculation"

Martin McLaughlin
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Last Friday morning the two leading US daily newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, carried virtually identical articles about the Egyptian reaction to claims in the American media that a suicidal pilot had caused the EgyptAir Flight 990 crash.

Public opinion in Egypt was refusing to give credence to the evidence and was searching wildly for some alternative theory, both papers reported. This reaction was fueled, they implied, by a propensity of people in the Middle East to believe in conspiracy theories where the United States was concerned.

The *Times* article, written by Douglas Jehl and headlined "Conspiracy Theories Cripple Probe," declared that "conspiracy theories are circulating wildly in Egypt, troubling both US and Egyptian officials. Some have blamed Israel's intelligence service for the crash; others have suggested the US investigators are covering up for Boeing, the plane's manufacturer."

The *Post* article, by Howard Schneider and Lee Hockstader, noted the widespread rejection of the suicide theory, not, they claimed, on the basis of examining the evidence, but "from the simple conviction that an Egyptian would not do such a thing."

The article continued: "That has left much of the Cairo press scrambling for an alternative theory. Writers have come up with everything from 'laser rays' to sabotage by Israel's Mossad intelligence service to a US government plot designed to avoid exposing Boeing Co. to liability."

State Department spokesman James P. Rubin denounced what he called "wild conspiracy theories" in the Arab press. "We're appealing for calm, and calm can only come if there is a minimum of speculation about conclusions in this country, and a minimum of wild, exaggerated, unfounded conspiracy theories in

other media in the Middle East."

But before the day was out, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Chairman James Hall acknowledged that American officials had leaked false information about the contents of the cockpit flight recorder tape—information that seemed to substantiate US claims that copilot Gamil Batouti deliberately crashed the plane.

Hall called a press conference Friday afternoon to denounce published accounts of taped conversations on the cockpit recorder. He criticized "reckless" media reports which were "just flat wrong." His agency wanted the truth, he said, and "we won't get there on a road paved with leaks, speculation, supposition, and spin."

While he would not single out the specific distortions, it was generally assumed he was referring to the alleged statement, "I have made my decision," widely reported to have been made by Batouti just before the plane began its sudden dive. After a team of Egyptian officials was allowed to listen to the tape, it emerged that these words were simply not to be found.

Hall said that any misinformation given out by unnamed government sources came from agencies other than his own. "We have not released specific information from the cockpit voice recorder," he said, "and any so-called verbatim information you have heard about that recorder is unauthorized, second-, third- or fourth-hand."

The agency most likely responsible for releasing the false information is the FBI, which has been seeking to take over the investigation into the EgyptAir crash for the past two weeks. FBI Director Louis Freeh himself may be the source of many of the leaks to the media attributed to "high Justice Department officials" or "anonymous government sources."

The American media was unfazed about its role as a conduit for such disinformation. Not one of the newspapers or television networks which falsely reported the contents of the cockpit voice recorder tape has publicly admitted that it was lied to or identified the "anonymous" and "senior" officials who supplied the false information.

As for the alleged affinity of Egyptians and Middle Eastern Arabs generally for "wild conspiracy theories," there are no more grounds for dismissing out of hand suspicions of US bias in favor of Boeing or fears of CIA or Israeli intrigue than there are for ruling out the possibility of pilot suicide. Up to this point, no convincing evidence has been brought forward to warrant a supposition of either mechanical failure, pilot responsibility, or some other explanation for the disaster.

What is disturbing is the evident haste on the part of American investigators, and the eagerness on the part of the media, to prematurely rule out mechanical failure and, on the basis of meager evidence at best, declare the probe a criminal investigation and turn it over to the FBI.

As both Arab and non-Arab commentators have noted, it seems unlikely, from a psychological standpoint, that a long-serving pilot, about to leave his job for a comfortable retirement, would suddenly take his own life and the lives of 216 other people.

On the other hand, theories suggesting a terrorist attack, directed either at the Egyptian regime in general or the 33 Egyptian military officers on board the flight, cannot be discounted. This includes the possible role of the Israeli secret service Mossad, working either directly or through agents in Islamic fundamentalist organizations. Such provocations have taken place in the past.

Nor can the US missile theory be simply dismissed as ludicrous. The US government has shot down at least one passenger airliner in the Middle East, the IranAir jet which was destroyed over the Persian Gulf in 1987. According to a current Italian judicial investigation, an Alitalia jet was shot down in 1980 over the Mediterranean by US warplanes pursuing a Libyan MiG in international waters—a shoot-down which has been concealed from the American public for nearly 20 years, but is widely known about in the Arab world.

It is, moreover, absurd to label the suspicion that US

authorities are seeking to protect Boeing, the largest American aircraft exporter, as a "wild conspiracy theory." This is exactly what the US government and Boeing did for more than a year after the explosion of TWA Flight 800 in 1996, pursuing claims of sabotage and terrorism until forced to admit that the disaster was caused by a design flaw in the fuel tank of the Boeing 747.

This is not only a matter of the huge potential liability should the deaths of 217 people be attributed to a failure of the company. Boeing is locked in an increasingly difficult struggle with the European aircraft manufacturing consortium Airbus Industries, and a series of highly publicized disasters—TWA Flight 800 now followed by EgyptAir Flight 990—could tip the balance and lead to the loss of multibillion-dollar orders.

Transferring the case from the NTSB to the FBI would mean a curtailment, or even a virtual halt, to the expensive recovery effort in the Atlantic. As a result, whatever evidence there might be of mechanical failure might be left to lie at the bottom of the ocean.

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