

# Airport attacks in 1985

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Simultaneous attacks on Rome and Vienna airports by the Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO) 30 years ago left 16 people dead and more than one hundred injured, writes **Tony Moore**

**T**he ANO was among the most dangerous and violent terrorist organisations of its time, engaging in indiscriminate violence against civilians, including children. The most serious attack on this occasion, insofar as casualties were concerned, occurred at the Leonardo da Vinci Airport in Rome, Italy, in 1985. The four terrorists who took part in the attack had been trained, along with three others who attacked the international airport in Vienna, at an ANO training camp in Syrian-controlled Lebanon. Prior to their departure, they stayed at an ANO apartment in Damascus. They then travelled to their destinations on fake Moroccan passports provided by Libya, which, at that time, was mounting a particularly robust terrorist campaign against European and American targets.

On their arrival in Rome, the four terrorists were unaware of their target, but met with ANO contacts Al Hamieda Rashid and Abu Mithkal, who provided them with the weapons – Kalashnikov AK-47 sub-machine rifles and F.1 grenades – which had originally been

supplied by Libya. Two, along with Rashid, reconnoitred the airport the night before, when Rashid identified the El Al and TWA check-in counters. At the same time, he relieved them of their fake Moroccan passports. Neither Rashid nor Mithkal took part in the attack.

On arriving outside the airport shortly before 09:00hrs on December 27, 1985, the four terrorists divided themselves into two and entered simultaneously through different entrances. The El Al and TWA counters were adjacent, and one pair opened fire on those waiting to check-in for the two flights, throwing grenades. The second pair opened fire on people standing in front of a bar/restaurant opposite the check-in counters.

Israeli security staff returned fire, killing three of the terrorists and wounding the fourth, but not before 13 people had been killed and 75 injured, some of them children. Among the dead were four Americans, including 11-year-old Natasha Simpson, who had been queuing with her father and younger brother. The whole incident had lasted a mere 55 seconds.

Bodies lay sprawled on the floor. Some of the wounded tried to crawl to safer places; others cried out in pain. Four Kalashnikovs and 11 unexploded grenades were recovered.

## Under fire

Meanwhile, at the Vienna Schwechat International Airport in Austria, three terrorists hurling grenades and spraying more than 130 rounds from AK-47 sub-machine guns, attacked people queuing at the El Al check-in desk from a staircase overlooking the queue. However, in the indiscriminate firing, bullets pierced the glass of an airport bank, triggering an alarm in a nearby police station. This brought Austrian police rushing to the airport.

In the meantime, two Israeli security guards returned fire and the terrorists retreated from the terminal, seized a car from its driver and fled. A chase involving Israeli security personnel and Austrian police ensued, during which a number of shots were fired by both the terrorists and pursuing security personnel. One terrorist was shot dead and the other two wounded. As a result, the terrorist driving the seized car lost control and crashed. The Austrian police took the two wounded terrorists into custody. Three people had been killed in the terminal; a further 44 were injured.

Responsibility for the two attacks was first of all attributed to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) but its leader, Yasser Arafat, denied this. Later, the ANO claimed responsibility in retaliation for Israel's bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis nearly three months earlier.

Eighteen months later, in May 1987, the two surviving terrorists from the Vienna attack were each sentenced to life imprisonment by an Austrian court. Prior to sentence, Saadkoui told the judge that their mission, to kill as many Israelis as possible, had been accomplished. The following year, in February, the sole surviving terrorist of the Rome attack was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment by an Italian court, but was released in 2011.

The attacks were a watershed for airport security, leading to greatly increased security measures being introduced around Europe and elsewhere. At Rome Airport, a catwalk was erected around the check-in areas on which police officers patrolled, armed with sub-machines and wearing body armour. In the United States, a common check-in counter was created to protect the identities of passengers travelling on El Al. At Heathrow, in London, police officers were authorised to carry the Heckler and Koch MP5 carbine, the first time that the police in Britain had carried firearms overtly as a matter of routine. 

## Author

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