



Italian Police officers escort Hakan Ekinci after he hijacked the Turkish Airlines flight from Tirana to Istanbul and diverted it to Brindisi.
(AP Photo/Max Frigione)

Hijacked From Tirana:

an interview with the Turkish Airlines crew

On 3rd October 2006 Turkish Airlines flight 1476 departed Tirana, Albania, for Istanbul. In the cockpit were **Captain Mürsel Gökalp (MG)** and First Officer **Yavuz Yilmaz**, both former members of the Turkish Air Force. In the cabin were Chief Flight Attendant **Nazenin Donder (ND)** and three other crewmembers looking after the 107 passengers on board. Amongst those passengers were Sabri Abazi, an Albanian Member of Parliament, four beauty queens who had been participating in the Miss Globe International pageant, and one Hakan Ekinci who, shortly after take-off hijacked the aircraft to Brindisi, Italy. **Philip Baum (PB)** travelled to Istanbul to interview the crew of the flight who now tell their tale...

PB: Could you describe your crew briefing procedures at the time?

MG: Before starting every flight, we had a special briefing at which we introduced crewmembers to each other. Included in this briefing were the cockpit door procedures. All communication was to be by intercom and the door itself should be locked once passengers had started boarding. Anybody who wanted to visit the cockpit had to call by intercom first and, when the door was open, the galley area had to be clear. On that day the briefing took place in Istanbul, prior to our departure to Tirana.

PB: What were the standard aircraft ground handling procedures in Tirana?

MG: The flight from Istanbul to Tirana was normal. Passengers deplaned, the aircraft was serviced and we prepared for our return to Turkey. As it's a quick

turnaround all the crew remain on board. We were not given any special information about passengers; there were no deportees.

ND: We boarded the aircraft by stairs at the front and rear of the aircraft. As Chief Flight Attendant, I was at the forward door, so I never actually saw Hakan Ekinci board the aircraft. He entered by the rear door and took his seat in the middle of the aircraft in row 14; it was an aisle seat.

PB: Did any of the crew identify any suspicious behaviour?

ND: No. Nobody thought he was acting strangely.

PB: How did the incident commence?

MG: We took off from Tirana and I turned off the seatbelt sign at 10,000 feet. Nazenin called me to ask if we wanted to eat and I said that we would after we had levelled off. So a few

minutes later she called me again and we gave her permission to come into the cockpit. As Nazenin came in, she was suddenly pushed further forward into the cockpit by a man who then grabbed her and, in a swift motion, turned her and pushed her out of the cockpit. He closed the door behind him. It was all very quick and in place of Nazenin all I could see was a man who was sweating like a bear and had piercing eyes. He looked very strong.

PB: What did he actually say?

MG: He said some-thing like, "I am the Leader of the team. There are three of us and I am the spokesman of the group. My name is Hakan Ekinci and I was born in Izmir in 1978 and we are only asking for one thing. You will go to Rome as we want to give a message to Pope Benedict (in advance of his intended visit to Turkey) to condemn him for his offensive speech about our prophet Mohammed.

PB: What type of language did he use?

MG: He spoke in Turkish and his language was abusive at first. Initially all orders were made in a threatening manner but, as the incident progressed, he calmed down. In fact, once we had landed he started chatting and at the end he even said thank you for everything and apologised for the hijacking. He told us that his plan had been to hijack the flight the day before so we were just unfortunate.

PB: You say he was threatening. What threats were made?

MG: He said they had C4-based plastic explosives. He was wearing a bum bag around his waist and it looked full. He claimed that's where the bomb was. As a Commander I'm not qualified to evaluate that kind of package. He said that if we didn't do as he said, he would blow up the aircraft.

PB: Do you recall your feelings at that time?

MG: All the various passenger profiles came into my mind...and I thought we were in big danger. I had a dry mouth. I was in shock. I was thinking about my family. But, at the same time I'm retired Colonel in The Turkish Air Force, so I forced myself to focus. I took a piece of paper and wrote down what he said. When he gave me the names of the other two hijackers on board, I wrote them down too.



Left to right: Captain Mürsel Gökalp (Captain, TK 1476), Buket Bekaroglu (Security Instructor, Turkish Airlines), Philip Baum (Editor, ASI), Nazenin Donder (Chief Flight Attendant, TK 1476) and Yavuz Yilmaz (First Officer, TK 1476)

PB: Meanwhile, Nazenin, you had found yourself forcibly thrown out of the cockpit by a hijacker and the door then locked from the inside. What did you do?

ND: I actually kept trying to open the door even though I realised we were being hijacked. I didn't panic and I didn't shout or call for assistance. I was not afraid. In fact, I didn't even tell anybody else to start with. Nobody saw what happened as there were no passengers in Business Class passengers. So, it was only when one of the other crew came to the front of the aircraft that I told anybody what was going on.

PB: How knowledgeable was he about the aircraft itself?

MG: Very. It later emerged that he had spent a month researching aviation and the ways in which crew may respond during a hijack. At the beginning, he warned me, "Don't make a fool of me, I will know. You will lose, not me".

PB: Did you believe him?

MG: Yes. He even showed us he knew our procedures. As we are not used to responding to hijacks, we actually initially squawked 7700 by mistake. On doing so, Ekinci said, "Hey, that's not the hijack code. How come you don't know that you are supposed to squawk 7500, not 7700"? Then I realised he really did know what was going on. I switched to 7500 and explained to the Greek air traffic control that we had

been hijacked and that we planned to go to Rome Fiumicino.

PB: If Ekinci insisted on Rome, why did you actually land in Brindisi?

MG: I entered "LIRF", being the code for Fiumicino, into the computer but, having conducted a fuel check we realised we had insufficient fuel to reach Rome. The calculation was 0.8. Ekinci was not happy and became threatening once more saying, "I don't care; you will go to Rome or we will blow up the plane and there will only be bones, blood and ashes remaining. If you obey, you will return home safe and sound and see your family members again". As we genuinely did not have enough fuel, I simply told him, "I'm leaving my position to you. You enter the codes and check for yourself." He said he believed me and that any Italian airport would serve his cause. I talked to Athens again and told them we were going to Brindisi and made the turn.

PB: Were you able to tell the passengers the reason for the turn?

MG: Ekinci did let me speak to the passengers, but not to the cabin crew. I made an announcement that we had received a message from Istanbul that the runway was closed and that we had been asked to divert to Brindisi. Even though this was the opposite direction from Tirana, it would appear that they took my word for it.

PB: How did the cabin crew react to this announcement seeing as they ►



Chief Flight Attendant Nazenin Donder

knew the aircraft had actually been hijacked?

ND: I had chosen not to use the intercom to tell the other crew what was happening in case the hijacker in the cockpit was monitoring what was being said. I didn't want to panic him. Also, I didn't know how many hijackers there were. I actually suspected, partly because of our training, that there may have been others on-board...sleepers. So, I walked to the back of the aircraft and told them the situation. None of the crew panicked.

PB: How did the other crew describe Ekinci's behaviour before he followed you into the cockpit?

ND: They said he had been acting normally and that, when he got up, he acted as if he was waiting to go to the toilet. He was an excellent actor.

PB: Did you continue with your normal inflight service?

ND: No. I told them to stop serving food. I didn't expect many complaints as it was during Ramadan and, given that it was a daytime flight, few of the passengers were eating anyway. I told them that, if asked by passengers, they could say that turbulence was expected. For that reason, we also said that the toilets could not be used. I'm not sure that the passengers realised which direction they were actually flying as we were operating a Boeing 737-400 which did not have the airshow. Had we been on the 737-800 they would have seen where they were headed. As it

was, there was no panic amongst passengers as they hadn't realised they had been hijacked.

PB: Did you ever doubt that the Captain was at the controls of the aircraft?

ND: No. I didn't think the hijacker was suicidal, even though he did not respond to my chimes. However, I was concerned that a bomb might explode or we might crash. We continued to try to identify whether there were any collaborators on board, but couldn't find any likely sleepers.

PB: Why didn't you respond to Nazenin's chimes?

MG: Ekinci wouldn't allow me to communicate with the cabin crew. I thought that there were three hijackers on board and that two had control of the cabin, so the only announcement I could make was to all the passengers – when I told them the runway was closed in Istanbul. Ekinci kept checking the cabin through the fish eye in the door as if to ensure that the cabin was in control. However, just before landing in Brindisi, he did allow me to answer one of Nazenin's chimes. All I said to her was, "Everything is safe; it's under my control. Do what they say and we will land in Brindisi. Once we have landed give the passengers anything they want".

PB: How familiar were you with the airport in Brindisi?

MG: Not at all, although I knew the area from my days in the Air Force. I asked my First Officer to set up charts for an approach to Brindisi charts, but we didn't have them. So, I checked the map and found the Brindisi frequency and managed to contact the tower. I told them that we had been hijacked and were approaching. He gave me their runways and the VOR approaches available; I designed an approach plate in case of a loss of communication.

PB: What concerns did Ekinci have about your communication with the tower?

MG: He was still worried that we were heading to Turkey. He looked out of the windows and saw mountains and thought that we were approaching Ankara rather than Italy. I told him to calm down and look at the heading, the map, the location of Tirana and the location of Rome and I showed him that we had made a 180-degree

turn. At least I knew he had an appreciation of avionics. He was eventually convinced. We landed on runway 14.

PB: Reports indicate that you were escorted in by the Italian Air Force?

MG: I'm told that we were escorted in by four F-16s, but on the ground I only actually saw two of them. I had kept telling air traffic control that I was in control so that they didn't shoot us down. That was my biggest concern. I kept saying that the hijacker was cooperative and would surrender once we had landed and that he just wanted to send a message to the Pope. I repeated that communication every 15 to 20 minutes.

PB: What happened once you had landed?

MG: We landed safely and he then said he wanted political asylum. I asked him about the others. He said, "No, just me; they will surrender but I want political asylum". I communicated that to the tower.

PB: So, how long did it take for the situation to be resolved?

MG: Two hours passed and nobody showed up! Nothing happened. They were not used or prepared to receive a hijacked aircraft. The control tower kept telling us that, "higher authorities are coming". They also kept asking us if there were Italians on board. It gradually got dark and we were surrounded by police cars, fire



Captain Mürsel Gökalp

engines and other airport vehicles. The flashing lights, of various colours, in the dark was quite a sight.

PB: Presumably the passengers were wondering why they were being kept on board so long?

ND: No. They understood. As soon as we had landed everybody turned on their mobile phones. Then they found out from their homes that they had been hijacked and that the story was all over the news.

PB: How did they respond?

ND: Everybody was calm. People just started talking to each other. "Hey we were hijacked"! There was only one objection - "why didn't we get any food"? The Captain had told me to serve the passengers once we had landed when he eventually spoke to me from the cockpit five or ten minutes before landing. And, as it was after 6pm and getting dark, those who had been observing the fast of Ramadan were hungry.

PB: Other than serve the passengers, what did the cabin crew do whilst the aircraft was on the ground?

ND: The crew seated themselves in seats 1A, 1B, 2A and 2B in case the aircraft was stormed; we wanted to make sure we were out of the way.

PB: Once the negotiators had arrived, what happened?

MG: All communication between the tower and the aircraft was via me, not directly with the hijacker. We told them Ekinici wanted to claim asylum. We were told that the First Officer should deplane first and that I should follow 30 minutes later, followed by the three hijackers; the passengers and cabin crew were to remain on board until later. So, the First Officer got off and, rather than be taken straight to the terminal, he was immediately subjected to questioning by the media; I saw it happening from the cockpit. Then it was my turn. As I left the cockpit, I made an announcement to the passengers saying that the hijackers were surrendering. An Albanian police-man on board translated for me. I then deplaned, still believing there were three hijackers.

PB: From the pictures it looks as if Ekinici followed you down the steps?

MG: Yes. Ekinici surrendered and was taken away by the police. The Italian authorities then made all passengers deplane with their belongings and they were taken to the terminal by bus. One woman complained she had missed her flight connection to Singapore! Nazenin was the last to leave the aircraft.

PB: What happened once you were released?

MG: We expected to leave Brindisi within two to three hours, but we were actually there for almost 12 hours. The Italian prosecutor questioned a couple of the passengers, Nazenin and myself; they never spoke to First Officer. The prosecutor couldn't speak English and it was obviously his first time in such a role. Two Turkish Airlines representatives from Milan and Rome came to help with translation and they also arranged refreshments for the passengers. As this was going on, we just sat and talked and said we were happy to ►

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be safe. The Italian authorities were confused because throughout the incident and even once I had deplaned, I had said there were three hijackers and yet there seemed to be just one.

PB: How do you feel you handled the situation?

MG: I am totally satisfied with the way we handled it. I am happy. We made a safe landing. Nobody was hurt. No aircraft destroyed. We just lost time; time that can be regained in the future.

PB: What lessons were learned?

MG: Perhaps we need to be more security-conscious in our daily behaviour. We have certainly reviewed our cockpit door procedures in relation to the serving of food and drinks to flight deck personnel and toilet usage. We redefined the line between cabin service and cabin security functions and reviewed procedures in the cabin crew manual. We are awaiting the Civil Aviation Authority's approval of our new security regime. The main thing is that we now block the aisle with the trolley

every time the cockpit door is opened and we are limiting the opening of cockpit door to a minimum.

PB: What are your thoughts on the deployment of CCTV and secondary barriers?

MG: The installation of cockpit cameras, of which we already have some on our newer Airbus fleet, is a necessity, but this can't happen overnight. I wasn't aware of the existence of secondary barriers but they sound like an excellent idea.

PB: What happened to Ekinci?

MG: He is awaiting trial. He was told that he is likely to face between 7 and 14 years imprisonment and, allegedly, attempted to commit suicide. He will be tried and sentenced in Italy rather than extradited to Turkey.

PB: What do we know about Ekinci?

MG: He had gone AWOL from his Turkish military service 6 months before it concluded. He travelled to Albania, where he had claimed asylum. The Albanians had denied him asylum and he knew that they were set to deport him back to Turkey. Rather than wait for that day, he

opted to hijack our flight to Italy. He had bought a normal ticket to Izmir via Istanbul.

PB: It is said that he had actually converted to Christianity and that he didn't wish to serve in a Muslim army. If so, why did he wish to protest about The Pope's statements concerning Islam?

MG: It's all very strange. During the incident he referred to The Pope's comments. He now says he converted to Christianity.

PB: What effect did the incident have on you upon your return to Turkey?

MG: It was a trauma. We had trouble sleeping. I dreamt I lost a wing. But, I was flying five days later.

ND: I had 11 days off. I had trouble sleeping. But, now I'm fine...

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