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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505



DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

23 April 1985

Terrorism as a Political Weapon:
Four Middle Eastern Case Studies

Summary

Terrorism in the Middle East is an integral component of political strategy. Terrorism will remain a political weapon in this part of the world because various hardline governments and subnational groups view bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings as a legitimate complement to diplomacy and war. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The major Middle Eastern promoters of terrorism--Lebanese factions, Iran, Syria, and Libya--have their own unique political milieus that condition their approach to terrorism and the targets they choose. Policies aimed at curbing terrorism in the Middle East are most effective when tailored to these differing milieus, addressing the specific political and military circumstances that engender the violence in each case. (b)(1); (b)(3)

This memorandum was prepared by analysts of the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 23 April 1985 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments are welcomed and should be directed to Director of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis at (b)(1); (b)(3)

NESA M#85-10080

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The environment in Lebanon, for example, will continue to encourage domestic political groups to use terrorist tactics against each other. Prospects for continued terrorism by the radical Shia Hizballah organization against US citizens--inside and outside of the country--depend on the continued US diplomatic and non-official presence in Lebanon and on the success of the Hizballah campaign to challenge the Lebanese Government. Individual Lebanese Shias, however, may try to carry out acts of terrorism outside of Lebanon at Iranian direction. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The future course of Iranian-sponsored terrorism will depend to a large extent on the outcome of the leadership struggle among Islamic radicals, pragmatists, and conservatives in Tehran once Khomeini dies. A clear victory for the pragmatists probably would reduce the intensity of Iran's terrorist campaign, although the US and France would remain primary targets. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Syria and Libya will continue to use terrorism as an instrument of state policy as long as Assad and Qadhafi remain in power, but their selection of targets will depend on their respective domestic political situations and shifting foreign policy goals. The Syrians will continue primarily to target moderate Arabs and Palestinians, while Qadhafi may begin directing terrorism against US interests. (b)(1); (b)(3)

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Lebanon: Terrorism Spawned by Civil War

Terrorist tactics have been a trademark of the Lebanese civil war for the past decade. Nearly all of the factional militias in Lebanon carry out kidnappings, assassinations, and bombings against their opponents. The civil war in Lebanon has engendered a subculture of violence that encourages the use of these tactics against both combatants and non-combatants. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The Lebanese conflict is primarily an unconventional war fought by irregular militias in urban areas. Although the militias possess and use artillery and tanks, they often find terrorism and hit-and-run street warfare to be the most effective

means of hurting their opponents. The Christian, Muslim, and Druze militias are often willing to use these tactics against the civilian population of rival sects because they see the civil war as an extended blood-feud from which no community is exempt. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Various participants in the civil war have begun to target Western officials and private citizens in recent years. The emergence of a network of pro-Iranian Shia fundamentalist groups--committed to forcing all Westerners out of Lebanon and establishing an Islamic state--has now made foreigners prime targets of violence. The radical Shia Hizballah movement is conducting an anti-Western holy war, which has included spectacular car-bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings. (b)(1); (b)(3)

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Lebanese radical Shia leaders work in collusion with Iran, which has greatly strengthened the Hizballah by providing money, weapons, training, and political and religious indoctrination. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards based in the Bekaa Valley maintain a close relationship with the Hizballah network and almost certainly help plan and facilitate specific terrorist operations. The Iranian revolution serves as the main source of inspiration for the Hizballah, and Iranian officials have tried to use their influence to coordinate and guide Hizballah activities. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The Hizballah, however, remains largely a domestic Lebanese political movement with a domestic political agenda. While Iran provided critical assistance in 1982 and 1983, the Hizballah movement does not depend on Iran for its existence. Shia fundamentalism--whetted by decades of Shia deprivation and (b)(1); (b)(3) Israeli occupation of predominantly Shia southern Lebanon--has firmly taken root in Lebanon and has achieved a momentum of its own. Hizballah elements can and do conduct many of their activities without Iranian foreknowledge. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Hizballah terrorism, like the terrorism carried out by other Lebanese groups, is largely driven by the movement's political goals in Lebanon. Lebanese Shia fundamentalists do not target Western officials primarily because Iran has ordered them to do so. Hizballah leaders share with Iran the objective of establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon and are therefore often receptive to Iranian encouragement and recommendations. Hizballah and Iranian cooperation on anti-Western terrorism arises from the shared belief that the first step in an Islamic revolution is the elimination of Western influence. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Terrorism, however, is only a part of the Hizballah and Iranian strategy for establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon. Successful terrorist attacks enhance local perceptions of the strength of the fundamentalist movement, but the bulk of their joint efforts and resources are devoted to political activities and social welfare programs in Shia communities, religious proselytization, and conventional military training aimed at creating a regular Hizballah militia. Most Hizballah violence is directed against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon and against the moderate Shia Amal militia. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Hizballah elements target US personnel partly as a means of indirectly attacking the Lebanese Government. The Hizballah, however, is gaining ground in its struggle with Amal for political and military dominance in the Shia community and may be in a position to challenge the Lebanese Government directly within a few years. If that happens, radical Shia leaders are likely to focus more attention and resources on targeting Lebanese--rather than US--officials and institutions. Moreover, if the US were to withdraw its Embassy from Beirut, Hizballah efforts toward achieving its internal Lebanese goals would take precedence over operations against US interests elsewhere. (b)(1); (b)(3)

If an Islamic state were eventually established in Lebanon, the Hizballah organization might then turn its attention to assisting Iran in using terrorism elsewhere to export the revolution. The organization's policy goals, in any case, will not prevent some individual Lebanese Shias from continuing to undertake acts of anti-Western terrorism outside of Lebanon at Iran's behest. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The proven Hizballah terrorist capabilities in Lebanon, however, do not necessarily extend to operations elsewhere. To date, radical Lebanese Shias have only been involved in one successful skyjacking and the 1983 bombings in Kuwait. Hizballah fundamentalist volunteers are generally poor, uneducated youths with little or no experience outside of Lebanon. They are unlikely to be able to operate as effectively in Europe as they do in Lebanon. The Hizballah has functioned successfully in its native Lebanon primarily because it has a well-developed infrastructure and support network there. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The key difference between Hizballah terrorism and the terror tactics used by other Lebanese factions is that many Hizballah recruits are willing to sacrifice their lives in their operations. Other Lebanese militias have limited themselves to

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booby-trapped and timer-activated vehicle bombs, which are considerably less effective than a car-bomb that is actually driven into the target. This fanaticism makes Hizballah violence far more dangerous and potentially successful. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Iran: Religious Zealotry versus Pragmatism

Tehran's support for terrorism stems primarily from the perception of the clerical regime that it has a religious duty to export its Islamic revolution and to wage, by whatever means necessary, a constant struggle against the non-Islamic world. Iranian leaders--both clerics and laymen--are convinced of the righteousness of Khomeini's brand of Islamic fundamentalism and believe that other Muslim societies would benefit from it. This religious motivation provides some Iranian leaders with a moral justification for the use of terrorism. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The Iranians' revolutionary efforts--which include both subversion as well as terrorism--have been directed most intensively against the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and in support of fundamentalist radical Shias in Lebanon. Iran also sponsors terrorism against exiles opposed to the Khomeini regime and US and French interests in the Middle East. Tehran's aim is to eliminate Western influence, overthrow pro-Western regimes, and establish Islamic republics. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The Iranian leadership is divided between Islamic radicals and pragmatists who support the use of terrorism--although for different reasons--and conservatives and moderates who generally oppose it. Islamic radicals, such as Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholeslam and Intelligence official Majid Kamal, are the main advocates of terrorism as a legitimate tool of state policy. In their view, the fusion of politics and religion justifies any means to export the revolution. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Pragmatists--such as President Khamenei, Assembly Speaker Rafsanjani, and Ayatollah Montazeri--are willing to support whatever policies are likely to further Iranian interests. They condone terrorism because it can be a highly effective instrument of policy, but they also recognize the need for improved state-to-state economic relations and have sought to curb radical excesses. The pragmatists prefer to use terrorism selectively, choosing targets important to Iranian national interests rather than purely revolutionary goals. The best means to export the revolution, in their view, is through a campaign of propaganda and subversion rather than terrorism. (b)(1); (b)(3)

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Conservatives and moderates generally oppose terrorism and favor a less militant foreign policy. They support the assertion of Iranian military power, especially in the Gulf, but also believe in improved relations with the West. They are unlikely, however, to dominate Iranian foreign policy after Khomeini's departure. (b)(1); (b)(3)

We believe a trend toward a more pragmatic foreign policy has surfaced in the past year or two. Members of the pragmatic faction have dominated the Iranian leadership during this period. Despite this trend, however, none of the groups contending for control of foreign policy has achieved dominance. Competition among them is likely to intensify as Iran moves toward the post-Khomeini era. The outcome will largely determine the extent to which Iran uses terrorism as an instrument of policy. (b)(1); (b)(3)

We believe that terrorism will be one of the key issues over which the factions fight. The radicals will use their rivals' willingness to support terrorism as a test of their commitment to the revolution's goals. While the pragmatists are likely to dominate Iranian foreign policy after Khomeini's departure, they probably will not feel secure enough to ignore radical demands for terrorism. The pragmatists probably will tolerate terrorist operations in return for radical support or neutrality on issues the pragmatists consider more pressing--such as the economy and the war with Iraq. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The internal power struggle among radicals, pragmatists, and conservatives will influence the targets and intensity of Iranian-supported terrorism. Both radicals and pragmatists view the US as a threat. Radicals believe that the US presence in the Middle East jeopardizes the resurgence of Islam, while the pragmatists fear Washington is working to overthrow the Iranian regime. Both are willing to target French interests because Paris provides important support to Baghdad. The US and France therefore will remain high priority targets for Iranian terrorism no matter which faction rules in Tehran, barring the unlikely accession of a conservative coalition. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The intensity of the anti-Western campaign, however, depends on which group is in control. The radicals would make such terrorism a centerpiece of their policies. The pragmatists advocate a more selective use of terrorism, weighing carefully the cost to Iran. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Radicals in any event will retain the capability to stage terrorist incidents without their colleagues' approval. They may

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use terrorist operations deliberately to undermine some pragmatist policies. Both camps are likely to support increased terrorism abroad if Iran's international position appears to be weakening because of domestic problems or reverses in the war, in order to rekindle revolutionary enthusiasm and to rally the people against perceived foreign threats. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Hizballah terrorism against US personnel in Lebanon is a special case. All of the factions in Tehran are likely to continue to support Hizballah terrorism, even at the risk of US retaliation, because the movement has proven itself to be unusually effective and has the potential to spark an Islamic revolution there. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Syria: Terrorism by Proxy

Syrian President Assad believes that terrorism or the threat of terrorism can be an effective tool of state policy. Assad uses terrorist tactics such as assassination and intimidation to advance his primary foreign policy goals, which include weakening the neighboring Arab regimes of Jordan and Iraq and preventing Palestinian moderates from agreeing to negotiate with Israel. Much of Assad's foreign policy--and his selection of targets for terrorism--revolves around the Syrian commitment to long-term struggle with Israel and determination to recover the Golan Heights. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Assad prefers to work through surrogate groups, many of which are trained and based in Syria, whose political objectives coincide with his. Attempts to use Syrian personnel have resulted in significant embarrassment to the regime. Palestinian radicals, such as the Abu Nidal group, the PFLP-GC, Fatah rebels, and Saiqa, have carried out terrorist operations at Syrian direction or with Syrian support. (b)(1); (b)(3) In at least some instances, Damascus has tried to use Lebanese Shia extremists for terrorist purposes. The Syrians also support Jordanian and Iraqi dissidents, Armenians, Kurds, and others. (b)(1); (b)(3)

The targets of Syrian-sponsored terrorism depend on the current focus of Syrian foreign policy. Israel remains a constant target because the Syrians view Israel as their primary, long-term enemy. Damascus promotes violence against pro-Arafat Palestinian leaders and Jordanian officials in response to Jordanian or Palestinian moves toward an accommodation with Israel. Assad also holds out the threat of terrorist attacks against Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt, and Turkey to

extract financial support or to ensure that Syrian interests are not ignored. The regime has also at times targeted Syrian dissidents abroad. (b)(1); (b)(3)

We do not believe Assad views US personnel or facilities in the Middle East as primary targets for Syrian-sponsored terrorism. Assad continues to believe that US pressure on Israel ultimately will be required if Syria is to regain sovereignty over the Golan Heights. This conviction almost certainly reinforces Assad's inclination to avoid closing any options by precipitating a major confrontation with the United States. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Some evidence suggests the Syrians encouraged attacks against the US Marines in Lebanon in 1983 and assisted the bombings in Kuwait, but most of the Syrian efforts were aimed at putting conventional military pressure on the US-backed government to abrogate the accord Lebanon had signed with Israel. Damascus has generally provided only indirect support for anti-US terrorism in Lebanon, for example by allowing Lebanese Hizballah groups and their Iranian allies to operate from the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. The Syrians have also provided direct assistance to radical Palestinian and Jordanian groups that have attacked US interests in Jordan. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Assad, however, has been angered by some of the anti-US terrorist attacks carried out by the Hizballah in Lebanon. (b)(1); (b)(3)

(b)(1); (b)(3)

The Syrians, who are becoming increasingly concerned over the growth of the Shia fundamentalist movement in Lebanon, are unlikely to support Hizballah terrorism against the United States in the future. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Libya: Targeting Qadhafi's Enemies

Libyan leader Qadhafi, like Assad, views terrorism as an effective political weapon both at home and abroad. Unlike Assad, however, Qadhafi perceives Libya to be a catalyst for revolution in the Arab world and Third World states in general. This has caused Qadhafi to be a more persistent and ideological promoter of organized terrorism in pursuit of his political objectives. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Qadhafi's current foreign policy priorities are isolating the US as the lone proponent of diplomatic and economic sanctions

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against Libya, eliminating the opposition to him among exiled Libyan dissidents, and unifying the Arabs against US and moderate Arab efforts to reach a negotiated Middle East peace. (b)(1); (b)(3)

To achieve these objectives the Libyan leader uses terrorism as part of a broader strategy that includes threats, offers of cooperation, economic incentives, and intimidation. Like President Assad, Qadhafi supports, and trains radical groups to serve as subversive agents and surrogate terrorists to minimize direct Libyan involvement. He has only employed Libyan nationals in attacks on Libyan dissidents and in plots against high-level Egyptian officials. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Qadhafi continues to direct most of his terrorist efforts against Libyan dissidents and moderate Arab leaders wherever he can. He has targeted the Egyptian, Chadian, and Sudanese heads of state because of their opposition to Libyan goals in Africa, their moderate approach to Arab-Israeli issues, and their close ties to the US. Tripoli almost certainly has added Jordan's King Hussein to the hit list following Amman's resumption of diplomatic relations with Cairo. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Libya is continuing to strengthen its terrorist capabilities. Particularly worrisome is Qadhafi's increasing willingness to use military means in clandestine special operations such as the bombing of Omdurman radio station in Sudan in March 1984 and the mining of the Red Sea last summer. Qadhafi, in our view, sees these actions as successful strikes against close US allies and interests for which he suffered no retaliation. (b)(1); (b)(3)

(b)(1); (b)(3) Libya is strengthening its capabilities, probably in preparation for more such operations. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Qadhafi demonstrated a willingness to target US personnel and installations as recently as 1981, but backed off when he knew the United States had learned of the threats and would retaliate against him. Since then, Libya has tried to incite non-Libyan groups such as Sudanese insurgents and radical Palestinians to attack the US, but without any direct Libyan involvement. The current consensus of the US Intelligence Community is that Qadhafi would attempt direct attacks against US personnel or installations if he believed he could avoid retaliation and believed that the US was engaged in a direct threat to his person or was actively attempting to overthrow his regime. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Some CIA analysts believe that direct Libyan attacks on US interests are unlikely and that the threat of these is not growing. While Qadhafi's anti-US rhetoric has escalated in the

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last year, there is no reliable evidence of Libyan planning to attack US interests directly. These analysts believe Qadhafi continues to be deterred by the threat of US retaliation because the risk of discovery for any plot involving Libyans remains high. Libya will continue to incite others to attack the US, but there is no evidence that Libya has become more active in these efforts in 1985 than it has been during the past few years.

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Other CIA analysts, however, believe that Qadhafi probably has judged that he can survive US retaliation and that Washington is working to oust him. As a result, they believe the direct terrorist threat to US targets from Libya is growing.

-- Qadhafi clearly believes--and has stated both publicly and privately--that Washington is supporting the increasingly active Libyan opposition groups in an effort to bring down his regime.

-- Qadhafi probably is confident that any US retaliation for Libyan terrorism--particularly if the public evidence were ambiguous and plausibly deniable by Tripoli--would receive little or no international support and would in all likelihood be unilateral and demonstrative.

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US personnel and facilities in neighboring Sudan and Egypt would be the most likely targets of such Libyan-backed terrorist operations because of their proximity and the fact that a successful operation against a US facility there would humiliate both the US and one of its Arab friends.

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While we cannot rule out direct Libyan attacks on US targets in the United States, we believe that Tripoli is more likely to confine operations here to assassination of Libyan dissidents. There are some 3,000 Libyan students in the US--approximately 1,200 sponsored by the Libyan Government--from whom Qadhafi might recruit operatives to attack his opposition. By attacking exiles in the United States, Qadhafi would signal that he is both capable of striking his opposition anywhere and embarrassing the US Government. He probably believes attacks aimed at non-Americans would limit Washington's ability to justify retaliation against Tripoli.

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Implications

The uses and targets of terrorism in each of these Middle Eastern cases are as different as the politics of Lebanon, Iran, Syria, and Libya. Prospects for continued terrorism in each case and possible US responses to it should be evaluated in the context of the unique political and military environment from which the violence arises. (b)(1); (b)(3)

Policy options aimed at reducing Middle Eastern terrorism that are not country-specific are unlikely to succeed. Aggressive policies designed to discourage the broad phenomenon of international terrorism may reduce the short-term vulnerability of certain diplomatic personnel and installations, but they will not affect the underlying political roots of the problem. (b)(1); (b)(3)