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Yugoslavia: PLO Ties and Terrorism

SUMMARY

Belgrade's close ties to the mainline PLO represent the most solid basis for Western charges that Yugoslavia abets international terrorism. The Yugoslav government has had sporadic contact in the past with more radical Palestinian factions--including Abu Nidal and the PFLP-SC--and it continues to cultivate links with South African insurgent groups such as SWAPO, the ANC, and the PAC. But the Yugoslavs have invested little in these relationships by comparison with their commitment of diplomatic support, material assistance, and military training to the mainline PLO. Belgrade, concerned by recent Western criticism, may decide to restrict its contacts with at least some of these groups and may even become more circumspect in its dealings with Arafat. Yet it will not likely alter its basic relationship with the PLO for the foreseeable future, nor will it become a reliable ally of Western governments against Palestinian extremists.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Southeast European Branch, East European Division, Office of European Analysis. It was coordinated with the Office of Global Issues, the Office of Near East South Asia and the Directorate of Operations. It was requested by Roland Kuchel, Bureau of East European and Yugoslav Affairs, Department of State. Comments and questions are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, East European Division, EURA [redacted]

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Diplomatic Support

Yugoslavia's backing of the Arab and Palestinian sides in their dispute with Israel dates from Tito's close relationship with Nasser in the 1950s during the formative years of the Nonaligned Movement. Tito made no secret of his pro-Arab tilt or his sympathy with the PLO. He allowed Soviet cargo aircraft to fly over Yugoslavia en route to Egypt during its 1967 war with Israel and he pushed hard in 1975 for the UN resolution condemning Zionism as a form of racism. While denouncing the threat to Yugoslavia of Croatian terrorists abroad, Tito permitted PLO terrorists to pass freely through his own country. He approved the opening in Belgrade in the 1970s of a PLO diplomatic mission, which continues to cooperate with the Yugoslav government in monitoring the activities of Palestinian radicals transiting or residing in the country. [redacted]

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The Yugoslavs appear strongly committed to Arafat. [redacted]

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[redacted] In recent weeks Yugoslav leaders have repeatedly reasserted that Arafat's PLO was "the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." [redacted]

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The Yugoslav government regularly receives high-level PLO visitors, including Arafat who last visited the country in July 1983. The US Embassy in Belgrade reports that Arafat may again visit Yugoslavia in March. In late January Abu Jihad (Halil Al Wazir), Fatah's deputy military commander and a veteran of numerous anti-Israeli terrorist operations, met in Belgrade with the Yugoslav ministers of Defense, Foreign Affairs, Internal Affairs, and other senior officials. According to the Yugoslav press, Abu Jihad was promised continued "comprehensive" support in the struggle against Israel. [redacted]

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Belgrade has not altered its pro-Arab slant or its staunch support for the PLO in the wake of the Achille Lauro affair last October, even though it has indicated a willingness to increase cooperation with the West on terrorism. In January, Deputy Foreign Minister Loncar asserted that the United States and Israel shared equal responsibility with Libya for heightened tensions in the Mediterranean. [redacted]

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Military Training

Belgrade continues to provide military training for the mainline PLO. The Jordanian press recently quoted a Palestinian source in Amman affirming that Palestine Liberation Army personnel are now receiving training in Yugoslavia. Military training for PLO members has been almost constant since the early 1980's. [redacted]

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Belgrade openly condemned Abu Nidal for the first time following the Rome and Vienna airport attacks in December. The State Presidency, which oversees foreign and security policies, apparently is now attempting to distance itself from Abu Nidal with its public denunciations of terrorism, although we would not rule out a resumption of secret, close contacts if Belgrade should again perceive it to be in its interest to do so.

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Yugoslavia's international image also has been hurt by its reputation as a transit point for international terrorists, even though the government likely has little control over such movement.

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#### Motivations for Supporting Terrorist/Liberation Groups

Belgrade probably perceives its support for the PLO as strengthening its hand within the Nonaligned Movement, of which it was a cofounder and is a leader of the moderate wing. In recent years Yugoslavia has been under assault from Cuba and other nonaligned radicals--as well as Moscow--for its allegedly lax record in supporting anti-Western causes. Belgrade probably felt rewarded, for example, by the positive reaction in the movement to Yugoslavia's support for Abu Abbas in the Achille Lauro affair.

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Economically, Belgrade has long been concerned to maintain its good standing among the Arab states. The region accounts for a large share of Belgrade's annual billion dollar arms export trade and has been a growing market for exports of machinery and chemicals. Yugoslavia earns significant foreign exchange from civilian and military planning, engineering, and construction projects in Libya and Iraq and in recent years Belgrade has accepted partial payment in oil for these services.

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Yugoslav history also shapes Belgrade's perception of terrorist acts. The creation of the first Yugoslav state in 1918 was the outcome of a terrorist attack in Sarajevo by the Serbian terrorist "Black Hand Society" with at least the tacit backing of some elements of the Serbian government. The modern Communist Yugoslav nation was born in a national liberation war--raised by regime propagandists to a struggle of epic proportions--in which the German invaders viewed the Yugoslav partisans much like terrorist gangs. Yugoslavs today still celebrate the deeds of the Hajduks--Yugoslavs who took to the hills to terrorize the

Turkish occupiers between the 14th and 19th centuries. The Macedonians at the turn of the century were renowned throughout Europe for their terrorist deeds in pursuit of their own state.

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Yugoslav society is probably more accepting of violence, such as that used by terrorist movements, than its West European counterparts. When the US Embassy several years ago installed metal detectors at its gates it reported an unusually high proportion of southern Yugoslavs carrying weapons. The ethnic Albanians in and near Kosovo province still carry on blood feuds. Even the more Central European Croats indulged in bloody, brutal actions against the Serbs during World War II, deeds that were reciprocated in kind.

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Belgrade also seems motivated by concerns for its own internal security. It has long been worried about terrorist attacks both in the country and against its interests abroad, dating from the assassination of King Aleksandar in Marseilles by Croatian extremists in 1934. Belgrade probably calculates that it can prevent attacks on Yugoslav territory by some groups--such as Abu Nidal--by cooperating with them. Yugoslav security officials probably also hope that they will receive warnings of impending attacks by other organizations from friendly groups tied to the global terrorism network.

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#### Reactions to Western Criticism

Belgrade is coming under increasing pressure from its Western neighbors following public reports that terrorists have transited Yugoslavia enroute to West European targets. Following Secretary Shultz's visit in December, Italian President Cossiga in January and Austrian Interior Minister Blecha in February also pressed Belgrade to act more decisively against terrorism.

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Belgrade--while perhaps slow to realize how seriously Washington regards the issue--has responded with gestures intended to mollify Western governments. In early February, the Austrian Interior Minister told the press that Belgrade had agreed to share information on Armenian and some Palestinian terrorist groups. In an effort to justify its own awkward positions following the Achille Lauro affair, Belgrade also issued a definition of terrorism that--while severely flawed and falling far short of US positions--seemed designed to mollify Western critics. According to the definition, violent acts committed in disputed territories such as the West Bank should be seen as the actions of "national liberation movements" while those committed elsewhere could be branded as terrorist.

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Yugoslavia's moves so far are largely cosmetic, however, and will probably not satisfy most governments in Western Europe. Belgrade is unlikely to provide much useful information to

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Vienna, particularly after a public announcement of the agreement. And its definition of terrorism, of course, will allow it to continue providing substantial support to the PLO.

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Implications for the US

[redacted] suggests that the Yugoslav leadership is now uncertain how it should handle relations with terrorist/insurgent groups other than the mainline PLO. Some leaders--prodded by Western criticism--will likely question the wisdom of such contacts, while others, probably including security officials, can be expected to persist in arguing that such contacts are needed to increase Yugoslav influence in the Middle East. [redacted]

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Yugoslav support for extremist Palestinian groups, however, will probably remain limited for some time. In light of Western concern and adverse publicity, Belgrade is unlikely to move closer to these groups or provide increased material support or training. Similarly, it is unlikely to become significantly involved with any Western European terrorist groups. [redacted]

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Belgrade will probably continue to make efforts to demonstrate its commitment to curbing international terrorism, but it will not risk damaging its Arab ties. Belgrade, however, may be willing to cooperate with Western governments against extremist groups which have little support among states it considers important--such as the Armenian groups mentioned by the Austrian official. [redacted]

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Yugoslavia's controversial military and diplomatic support for the mainline PLO will continue, regardless of Western concern. If, in the foreseeable future, Western interests clash with those of the mainline PLO, as was the case in the Abu Abbas affair, the Yugoslavs will probably again come down on the side of the terrorists, leaving relations with the West to be repaired later. [redacted]

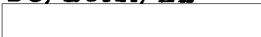

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