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A Shadow War Against Terror

The following article is based on reporting by Richard Halloran and David K. Shipler and was written by Mr. Shipler.

WASHINGTON, Nov. 25 — Americans have been attacked in 72 countries since 1968, and American citizens and property are now the targets of about 30 to 35 percent of all international terrorist incidents, according to State Department figures. Attacks so far in 1985 have left 17 Americans dead and 154 wounded.

Nevertheless, the State Department also counts more than 90 planned attacks on American citizens and sites abroad that have been foiled in the last 12 months.

For the United States, these are the silent victories in a shadowy war. The international range of the battle was illustrated by one of those thwarted plots.

About a year ago a Libyan intelligence officer and a Palestinian from Jordan met in Rome to discuss an ambitious, dramatic plot. With nearly 200 pounds of explosives, a truck bomb would be assembled, parked near the United States Embassy in Cairo and set off by remote control on a busy weekday.

At the Rome meeting, according to American and Egyptian intelligence, the Libyan promised \$500,000 to the Palestinian for his part in the plot.

Over the next six months the Palestinian conducted surveillance on the embassy in Cairo, went to Syria for weapons and explosives training from the radical Abu Nidal Palestinian group, traveled to Lebanon to pick up the explosives-laden truck, took it by ship to Egypt and turned it over to other Palestinians for the attack.

But in that period one of the plotters also served as an informant for Egyptian security, which sealed off the embassy's surrounding streets and foiled the attempted bombing on the afternoon of May 22, 1985.

This invisible record of success stands against a dramatic run of highly publicized violence, including the bombings of American Embassy buildings in Beirut, the destruction of the United States Marine compound at the Beirut airport, the hijacking of a Trans World Airlines jetliner in June, the seizure of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro last month and the hijacking last weekend of an Egyptair jetliner.

Slowly, almost ponderously, the policy makers, intelligence agencies and security systems of the United States have begun to adjust to terrorism as an expanding method of warfare. Washington has created coordinating committees, rescue teams, barriers at embassies and diplomatic efforts to enlist other countries in the battle. A task force on terrorism, headed by Vice President Bush, is scheduled to give President Reagan policy recommendations in late December.

But nobody involved sees a solution to the problem, and some specialists are worried that overreaction may drain resources away from more important areas of concern. Experts believe that intelligence information, passive security and military force are never going to be adequate to the task. Nor can rescue operations be counted on to succeed, as was demonstrated Sunday by the Egyptian commando unit that stormed the Egyptair plane in Malta, setting off a battle and fire that killed 57 hostages.

"We have rhetoric on terrorism, we have policy statements, we don't have strategy," said Brian Jenkins, an expert at the Rand Corporation. "We have a lot of terrorism in the world; we can't eradicate it any more than we can homicide in the United States."

A Trail of Terror

As long as people have used organized violence against each other's tribes and nations, they have invented methods of magnifying small attacks into major political assaults. The relatively weak have often found the vulnerable points of the powerful.

Indeed, the word "assassin" is believed by scholars to derive from "hashish," used by a Shiite Moslem sect, the Hashashin, to drug those about to be sent out on suicide missions against Crusaders and Sunni Moslems in the 11th century.

But the strategy of terrorism has found an especially supportive environment in an age of modern technology and expensive weapons. Unlike common crime, it involves not only victim and assailant, but a third party — an audience — whose policies and politics are the real targets of the assault. Complex factors now encourage it as a means of combat.

"Terrorism is a dominant factor on the international landscape for the past century," said Robert C. O'Connell, State Department's Special Assistant for International Terrorism.

A system of competitive arms sales makes weapons available more easily to terrorist groups. Mass communications assure instantaneous publicity for terrorist acts. Travel is becoming easier between different countries. Border controls are diminishing, particularly in Europe."

Many governments find regular warfare too costly, he added, "and terrorism is, therefore, viewed by several countries as a cheap way to strike a blow at their enemies."

While past efforts by the United States against terrorism have been spasmodic, Mr. Jenkins noted, the Reagan Administration appears to be maintaining steadier interest, partly because of terrorism's recent impact on American policy.

The truck bombing of the Marine garrison, in Beirut in 1983, which killed

241 Americans, for example, was instrumental in driving the United States military out of Lebanon. It was carried out by a Shiite Moslem group, reportedly with direction or support from the Governments of Syria and Iran.

The high priority given to combating terrorism also derives from Mr. Reagan's having come into office in 1981 on a groundswell of outrage over the 44-day captivity of American diplomats in Iran, an event that helped weaken President Carter and contributed to Mr. Reagan's election on a promise of tough retaliation.

"Let terrorists beware," the new President said seven days after his first inauguration, "that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution."

But when it has come down to specific cases, the Reagan Administration has been divided on the practicality and wisdom of retribution, often because a clear military target has not been found. Mr. Reagan said at a news conference during the T.W.A. hijacking last June, "If you just aim in the general direction and kill some people, well, then, you're a terrorist, too."

The most precise use of military force against terrorists came in the Achille Lauro episode last month, when Navy F-14 fighters forced down an Egyptian airliner carrying Palestinians who had hijacked the Italian passenger ship. It was that same plane that was hijacked last weekend.

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