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'IT IS FRUSTRATING' Battling the intelligence gap

Gathering data amid a morass of complications
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The first time President Reagan met with leaders of the American intelligence community, within a week of assuming office in 1981, one of those present recalls that Reagan was bluntly told the quality of US intelligence on worldwide terrorism was sorely deficient. The president ordered that it be improved.

Tens of millions of dollars have been spent toward that end, but now, in the wake of the TWA hijacking - the latest in a string of terrorist attacks directed against the United States - many are asking, to what effect?

"We're still five years behind where we should be," said Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, in a telephone interview. "Once you've got a terrorist situation where they've taken hostages, the options available are extremely limited. The only way it can be successful is to stop it before it happens. That's where we have a real problem."

In recent days, the Reagan administration itself has offered up what critics consider tacit acknowledgment of fundamental intelligence deficiencies on terrorism.

"The problem is who is perpetrating these deeds, who their accomplices are, where they are located . . ." said Reagan at his June 18 press conference. "It is frustrating, but as I say, you have to be able to pinpoint the enemy. You can't just start shooting without having someone in your sights."

Calls for retaliation in the hijacking - and in other cases such as the bombings of the US embassy in Beirut and the the Marine Corps barracks there - have been muted by the question of precisely who Washington should retaliate against, as well as by policy considerations of whether doing so would kill many innocent civilians and set off another round of reprisals for the original reprisal.

According to the Central Intelligence Agency, worldwide terrorist incidents rose from about 500 in 1983 to more than 700 in 1984. Last year there were 355 terrorist bombings around the world.

One forte of US intelligence, electronic surveillance through satellites, is of little use against terrorists. In gathering information about terrorism, a premium is placed on human beings. But two events

in the Middle East have compounded the difficulty of keeping track of terrorists there: the withdrawal of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon in 1982 and the 1983 bombing of the US embassy in Beirut.

Seven CIA agents were among the 63 persons killed in the embassy bombing, including Robert Ames, widely viewed as the agency's leading expert on the Middle East. Although the United States has for years officially refused to deal with the PLO because of its own use of terrorism and its hostility toward Israel, sources said the CIA had been able to establish a valuable network of contacts among the organization's leaders and guerrillas throughout Lebanon. The departure of the PLO from Lebanon thus robbed Washington of a significant source of information on terrorist doings in the region. A similar network has not been built up in the Shiite community.

"The country in general expects far more of intelligence than it can produce," said Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency during the Carter administration. "To know the inner workings of every terrorist group in the world is far beyond our capability. There are too many of them. They're too fanatic. You cannot just penetrate them overnight. They put up too stern a test of your loyalty. We've got to look on that as a job which we should try to do, but one which will never produce a high degree of results."

William Casey, current director of intelligence, said in an April 17 speech at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy that terrorist groups are "very tough nuts for intelligence to crack. That is almost self-evident. They are small, not easily penetrated, and their operations are closely held and compartmented. Only a few people in the organizations are privy to specific operations, they move quickly and place a very high premium on secrecy and surprise."

Bobby Ray Inman, who was Turner's deputy from 1982 to 1983 and director of the National Security Agency for four years before that, agreed that terrorist groups are an "incredibly difficult target. . . . But you just can't throw up your hands and say it's too hard. The track record to date is the absolute paucity of specific information in advance about terrorist activities." Inman also stressed that in tracking terrorist groups, collaboration

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between the intelligence services of Western allies becomes very important, "and my reading is that a number of countries have been reluctant to help us for fear of being retaliated against. We're the great enemy."

According to a Washington consultant who advises the Pentagon and the CIA on intelligence gathering on terrorists, there is another reason US allies are reluctant to share information: their fear that because of congressional oversight and other mid-1970s reforms, the CIA cannot adequately protect foreign sources and methods from leaks and disclosure in the press.

In the late 1960s and through most of the 1970s, revelations of past intelligence abuses and the political climate of the times forced fundamental changes in the way the CIA and other US intelligence agencies did their work. Congress established oversight committees and budgets were sharply cut. But in the latter part of the Carter administration and throughout the Reagan years, the pendulum has swung back so that many of those cuts have been restored - and expectations for better performance have risen accordingly.

A year ago, the administration decided to set up counterterrorist groups to be able to take preemptive or retaliatory action against terrorists, but key members of the intelligence community are said to have believed that the groups could not be controlled and would cause trouble for the United States. There was special doubt over the ability to take such action in Lebanon.

In March of this year, a car bombing in Beirut that had been directed at a Shiite leader suspected of leading terrorist activities against Americans killed 80 persons and wounded 200. The Washington Post reported that the attack was carried out by a group with ties to Lebanese intelligence and the CIA, but that the CIA had had no advance knowledge of the bombing. This action by a breakaway faction of Lebanese intelligence revealed, according to intelligence observers, the hazards - and the difficulty - of fighting terrorism.

"We have not developed a coherent policy on how to reconcile our own aspirations and ideals with the need for more protection," said Sen. William Cohen (R-Maine), a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee. "I don't think we've learned very much since Iran . . . I think we have to develop a policy on prevention, security and response. Are we prepared to attack sites where innocent people may be killed? Are we prepared to endure attacks domestically? These are issues which have not been debated."