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Hijacking Points Up U.S. Problems In Handling Violence by Shiites

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WASHINGTON – The hijacking of a Trans World Airlines jet underscores Washington's difficulties in dealing with Shiite Moslem violence in the Middle East.

With the Reagan administration nervously watching as the jetliner shuttled over the weekend between Algiers and Beirut, senior U.S. officials said privately that the hijacking may, at last, prompt a decisive U.S. response. But similar promises have been made in the past. Yesterday, President Reagan, who held a 75-minute emergency meeting with top advisers, warned the hijackers holding at least 30 Americans that they should "see that for their own safety, they'd better turn these people loose."

Despite a tough-sounding new antiterrorist policy outlined in April 1984 that called for preemptive and "pro-active" measures, the U.S. hasn't yet done much to prevent terrorist acts.

Experts outside the government said the lack of U.S. action has encouraged terrorists to believe that violence against American citizens and interests can be taken without fear of reprisal. Thus, these analysts contend, incidents like the weekend hijacking may be used to disrupt any progress toward Middle East peace and to warn Arab moderates, such as Jordan's King Hussein, that they can't depend on U.S. protection.

Ironically, President Reagan ran for office in 1980 against the image of a weak Jimmy Carter unable to act against the taking of U.S. hostages in Iran. In the past five years, U.S. experts said the same Shiite forces have turned Iran into a terrorist base, driven the U.S. and its allies from Lebanon and now are bent on ending the American presence in the region.

'Costs and Benefits'

Because the U.S. hasn't yet responded forcefully, this goal "is a rational conclusion," says Michael Ledeen, a government consultant on terrorism and former State Department special assistant. "This isn't the psychology of madmen; it is the psychology of costs and benefits."

Mr. Ledeen and others believe the U.S. must take retaliatory actions. "No one thinks you can eliminate terrorism totally by retaliating," Mr. Ledeen said. "But the hope is to limit it, to have full public support, to increase morale at home and thereby to deter a certain amount of it."

The Reagan administration, however, currently appears only to have bad options. Its friends in the region, such as the Algerian government and moderate leaders of the mainstream Amal militia in Lebanon, may try to help privately, but they can't afford to be seen assisting the U.S.

A direct commando operation, although clearly under consideration, would be all-but impossible without help from the government or militia groups controlling the Beirut airport, where TWA flight 847 was still stranded last night. (Sources in Beirut estimate there are up to 8,000 militiamen in or near the airport.)

Administration hard-liners have been urging the U.S. to follow Israel's example of harsh anti-terrorist reprisals. However, the Israelis lately have been big losers to Shiite terrorism, which has forced them to withdraw from Lebanon and exchange over 1,000 prisoners, mostly Palestinian, for three captured Israeli soldiers—an action bemoaned by an Israeli official over the weekend. Now, the hijackers are demanding the release of over 700 Shiite prisoners held in Israel.

Groups Are Fragmented

Further, the growing fragmentation among Shiite militants in Lebanon makes it increasingly difficult to gather intelligence and obscures possible retaliatory targets. One U.S. official said privately that the latest hijacking appears to be the work of "Musa Sadr people," suggesting that the hijackers are followers of a Shiite leader who founded the Amal militia in Lebanon during the early 1970s and later disappeared during a trip to Libya. The group that hijacked the TWA flight, therefore, is apparently different from the Islamic Jihad organization that has claimed credit for other anti-U.S. terrorist operations.

The Shiite terrorist organizations also appear to be made up of groups of compartmentalized cells whose members don't know operational plans or members of other cells. Such secrecy ensures that terrorists who are captured have little information to give their interrogators. Without such information, the U.S. can, at best, react to operations but loses the weapon of preemptive strikes.

A recent U.S. effort to take tougher measures backfired badly. The U.S. decided last December to train the Lebanese Deuxieme Bureau, the army's intelligence arm, in anti-terrorist methods. But the program encouraged Lebanese operatives to stage a car-bomb attack last March against Shiite religious leader Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, whom U.S. officials regard as a key Shiite terrorism figure. The operation killed about 80 bystanders, but missed the target. U.S. officials insist they weren't involved in the botched operation, which produced embarrassment here and reduced the appetite for such ventures.

The incident also points up the difficulties of finding reliable allies, or proxies, to carry out anti-terrorist actions as the situation in Lebanon continues to deteriorate.

But blame for the lack of a coherent and active anti-terrorist policy also lies with Washington. The Pentagon, especially the uniformed services, remains suspicious of special forces like the Delta Force anti-terrorist unit. And Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who appears to some critics to be more enthusiastic about acquiring military hardware than using it, remains skeptical about some of the tough anti-terrorist measures being pushed by others in the administration, particularly Secretary of State George Shultz.

Last fall, in a speech of the growing threat of terrorism, Mr. Shultz warned: "We cannot allow ourselves to become the Hamlet of nations, worrying endlessly over whether and how to respond."