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Policy Vacuum

A Clear Plan to Handle Terrorism Still Eludes Divided Reagan Camp

Some Doubt Value of Force; Priority of Saving Lives Leaves U.S. Few Options Successes Go Unpublicized

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WASHINGTON—Ronald Reagan, for all his tough talk, has failed to develop a coherent anti-terrorism policy.

The impotence of the U.S. policy has been dramatically demonstrated by the hijacking of TWA Flight 847. The seeming inability to develop a long-run strategy for dealing with such terrorism largely reflects the intractable nature of the terrorism problem itself, which is as frustrating for Mr. Reagan as it was for Jimmy Carter. But some experts say it also stems from such mundane troubles as bickering among cabinet officers, foot-dragging by bureaucrats who are skeptical of anti-terrorism efforts, and gung-ho schemes that have backfired.

For example, the Pentagon has been consistently skeptical about retaliation and delayed for months developing what one official calls a "menu of targets." That list is finally available, but it is of limited use because it emphasizes targets in Iran. The U.S. assumed that the next terrorist act would come from the same Iranian-backed group that was responsible for earlier terrorist attacks against the U.S. But the hijackers of Flight 847, it appears, aren't part of that pro-Iranian faction.

Terrorism experts criticize the wide gap between the administration's rhetoric and action. But "I don't think anybody has discovered an anti-terrorism policy that works," says former Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger. "The Israelis haven't. We haven't. We are all facing a new kind of warfare and we don't know how to deal with it."

Different Strain

One problem is that the terrorists of the 1980s are different from those of the 1970s, some experts say. The gunmen now are mostly Shiite Moslems, rather than Palestinians. And the techniques used against

Palestinian terrorism a decade ago—such as intelligence penetration of their operations and harsh retaliation against the perpetrators—may not work against Shiite terrorism.

Administration officials say they probably lost any chance for a quick rescue mission to free the Flight 847 hostages after the first 48 hours. Such a move was discussed but was ruled out because of technical problems. There is a continuing debate within the administration, however, over whether the U.S. should apply force if the crisis drags on.

"The U.S. could mount a raid of substantial size—because that's what it would take—and go into Beirut after the Amal leadership and the people who perpetrated this," says one senior administration official involved in managing the crisis.

Few Options

But President Reagan seems determined to seek a peaceful resolution of the crisis that saves the hostages' lives. "I could get mad enough now to think of a couple of things we could do to retaliate, but I would probably be sentencing a number of Americans to death if I did it," Mr. Reagan said at his news conference Tuesday night.

Richard Helms, a former ambassador to Iran and former CIA director, applauds Mr. Reagan for showing restraint in an exasperating situation. He explains: "The President, at this stage, has no useful military options—in fact, few options of any kind."

Mr. Reagan may yet find a solution to the current crisis. But administration officials agree that as long as saving hostage lives is the top priority, the U.S. will have limited options in handling terrorist incidents. A tougher policy would require the U.S. to subordinate the welfare of the hostages to broader national concerns—a painful step for any U.S. president.

Yet "these aren't attacks just against the victims, they are attacks against the U.S. and its interests," argues a senior official who advocates a tougher line.

New Concern

What worries some U.S. officials most at the moment is the possibility that the pro-Iranian "Islamic Jihad" faction, which wasn't part of the initial hijacking, has taken control of some of the prisoners and will use them to bargain for the release of 17 of its members held in Kuwait. Officials fear that this group may hold the three TWA crew members still on board and seven people with "Jewish-sounding names" who were removed from the plane, plus seven Americans kidnapped earlier in Beirut. The fear is that Islamic Jihad might seek to trade these 17 Americans for the Shiite prisoners in Kuwait and might kill them if any of the Kuwaiti prisoners are executed.

Quarrels within the administration have hindered development of a coherent anti-terrorism strategy. The reaction to the October 1983 bombing of Marine headquarters in Beirut, for example, was a case study in bickering and indecision.

Shortly after the bombing, U.S. intelligence identified a terrorist target in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. There was a top-level debate on Nov. 8, 1983, two weeks after the bombing, about whether to attack the target. But President Reagan was leaving that day on a trip to Korea, so officials decided to postpone a decision until he returned a week later.

When he got back, disagreements between the State Department and the Pentagon over the operation continued, and the U.S. at the last minute backed out of plans for a joint reprisal raid with France. The French went ahead on their own on Nov. 17. There never has been any American retaliation for the bomb that killed 241 American Marines.

Some of the administration's problems involve the technical difficulties of operating so far from home. For example, the U.S. couldn't move its special "Delta Force" commando unit to the Middle East quickly enough last Friday to strike in the first few hours of the hijacking, when a rescue mission would have had the best chance of success. The only way to be ready in the future, officials say, would be to keep a unit stationed permanently in the Mediterranean, rather than at Fort Bragg, N.C.

In hindsight, U.S. officials wonder whether they should have bombed the runway at Beirut to prevent the TWA flight from landing there—where it would be hardest to mount a rescue operation.

Lack of reliable intelligence also continues to hinder the U.S. Former CIA officials say the problem stems from a decline in the number of American penetration agents inside terrorist groups—especially inside the Shiite groups that pose the main problem—and from strained relationships with many of the Arab governments that could provide inside information.

One former CIA official contrasts the current hijacking crisis with a successful anti-terrorist operation in 1972. The CIA, he recalls, received information from a friendly Arab intelligence service that Palestinians planned to hijack a TWA flight bound from Rome to Tel Aviv. The CIA alerted the Italian police, who grabbed the terrorists in a Rome airport lounge as they passed weapons to a colleague arriving from Benghazi, Libya. The TWA plane made its trip without mishap.

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The administration has tried in recent months to push wary CIA and military officials into tougher anti-terrorism programs, including closer links with other nations' spy services. But these efforts have sometimes backfired.

Preemptive Strikes?

The CIA, for example, resisted for months the arguments by some administration hard-liners that the U.S. should mount preemptive operations. The agency viewed such tactics as perilously close to assassination, a tactic that helped bring the CIA into disrepute in the 1970s. Reluctantly, the agency last December endorsed a new presidential program that would have the CIA train the Lebanese and other friendly Arab intelligence services to preempt terrorists.

The plan proved a disaster. The Lebanese spy service, like the rest of the country, had largely disintegrated by early this year. Some of its members decided to undertake a preemptive operation of their own in a car bomb attack March 8 against Shiite religious leader Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah in a Beirut suburb. The bomb missed Sheik Fadlallah but killed about 80 others. The CIA insists it didn't have any involvement in the operation and didn't train those who carried it out. But in the uproar that followed the bombing, the agency retreated from the plan to train Arabs for preemptive operations.

Administration officials believe that developing a sound anti-terrorism policy has been difficult because elements of such a policy go against the American character. "Our virtues are frequently our vulnerabilities," contends Noel Koch, a deputy assistant secretary of defense who helps supervise counterterrorism planning. "The value we place on an open society is exploitable. Our respect for human life is exploitable. And so there is question of how to maintain these values and yet defend ourselves. There are no happy choices available."

Unpublicized Successes

U.S. officials insist that the anti-terrorism effort isn't as bad as it looks. They point to better transport capability for Delta Force; better command and control procedures that reduce the layers of Pentagon bureaucracy involved in military operations; and better handling of intelligence information, including a new system that allows anti-terrorism officials to monitor raw intelligence reports immediately and assess what information is new and important.

Officials also claim that the U.S. has helped avert some terrorist operations, including a recent plot to kill Libyan dissidents in the U.S., a plot to blow up the American embassy in Cairo and attacks planned against American facilities in Lebanon at the time of the U.S. presidential election and inauguration.

"The problem isn't with the administration, it's with the nature of terrorism," says Robert Oakley, the coordinator of the State Department's anti-terrorism program. "Given the nature of the problem and the way terrorists operate, we won't always succeed in deterring terrorism, and often when we do it can't be publicized. The public is going to be more aware of the failures than the successes."

The toughest problem of all, officials say, is developing a long-run strategy to contain the explosion of Shiite terrorism in the Mideast that has followed the Iranian

revolution. Israeli anti-terrorism methods that were developed in the 1970s to deal with Palestinian terror don't help much now, they say.

"Shiite terrorism is much different than Palestinian," says Fadi Hayek, the spokesman for the Christian "Lebanese Forces" militia in Washington. "It isn't a political and nationalist movement, it is a religious and transnational movement. It has roots and bases in various countries, which makes it difficult to spot. And because the Shiite community has little political structure, there aren't any pressure points."

Penetration and other intelligence-gathering techniques don't work well with the Shiite groups because of their loose structure, and intimidation tactics don't work well because the Shiite fighters are intensely motivated. The Palestinians, in contrast, tend to have well-structured leadership and frequent morale problems.

Because the Shiites are sometimes eager for martyrdom, Mr. Hayek notes, "the usual mechanics of political negotiation don't apply."