

Spying on Terrorists—It's A Tall Order

To punish hijackers, U.S. must know who and where they are. The CIA is hard pressed to provide the information.

In the war on Middle East terrorism, America's intelligence services are up against one of their toughest challenges ever.

Their task: Cracking the shadowy bands of Moslem zealots to obtain the information needed to pre-empt anti-U.S. acts of violence or to punish those terrorists who succeed.

In attempting to match overseas the success of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in penetrating and neutralizing terrorist organizations at home, the Central Intelligence Agency faces enormous obstacles.

Particularly difficult to infiltrate are the Shiite terror cells in Lebanon responsible for the current hijacking episode as well as most of the major attacks on American installations in the Middle East in recent years.

These cells of killers are small, clan-ish and fanatic. Sometimes they consist solely of brothers and cousins who are distrustful of all outsiders. "Almost everyone is suspicious of every-

Attack on Shiite gunmen by carrier-based planes is one Reagan option. But it requires information on their identity and whereabouts.

body" else, maintains former State Department terrorism analyst Terrell Arnold. "Their paranoia is a big problem for us."

Compounding that problem is the fact that today's hard-core terrorists are true professionals, trained and equipped by experts from Eastern Europe or radical Mideast states.

Some operations, according to American intelligence sources, are planned and staged by teams whose members may come together only for a single spectacular attack. The group then dissolves and disappears, making attempts at pre-emption or retaliation virtually impossible.

Entrance test. Prospective Western informers or agents often are deterred from trying to penetrate the terrorist gangs by demands that they demonstrate their bona fides in advance—by committing murder or other violent crimes.

"Some of the groups are so fanatic," warns former CIA Director Stansfield Turner, "they they will put your agent to a test that he can't possibly accept."

Ironically, the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon in 1982 by the Israeli Army dealt a serious blow to the operations of the CIA and those of Mossad, its Israeli counterpart, in combatting Mideast terrorism. The two intelligence agencies relied heavily on operatives within the PLO to provide information on activities of Palestinian and other Arab underground groups.

Despite the difficulties, officials assert, the CIA has managed, directly or indirectly, to penetrate some clandestine groups in the Mideast and elsewhere overseas. On June 24, Secretary of State George

Shultz said in a press interview that the U.S., in cooperation with intelligence organizations of other nations, had been able to obtain advance warning of some 60 planned terrorist operations over the past nine months.

One example, say officials, was when a CIA informant disclosed that a Shiite gang was preparing for an attack on the American ambassador's residence in Beirut last fall. Since they knew the identity of the group and the general location of its hideout, the authorities were able to forestall the assault.

Saudi Arabia's royal family has been able to take precautions against terror attacks on the basis of information that U.S. intelligence officials passed on from Israeli agents who had infiltrated Middle Eastern guerrilla groups.

There are other instances of successful international cooperation in the campaign against terrorism. One came last November when Italian police rounded up seven Shiite Lebanese who reportedly were plotting to blow up the American Embassy in Rome. The Italians, acting on a tip from Swiss authorities, alerted Washington in time for protective measures to be taken. An eighth man was arrested in Zurich.

Collaboration with friendly intelligence agencies also paid off for the U.S. recently when Egyptian agents uncovered a Libyan plot to attack the American Embassy in Cairo with a truck loaded with explosives.

Beyond the grave. Dogged police work resulted in the arrest of Shiite terrorists from Iraq who carried out a suicide truck-bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait in 1983. Kuwaiti authorities recovered two fingers of the driver. Identification of his fingerprints led to capture of the others involved in the attack.

Experts on American intelligence matters say that the CIA and other Western services have managed to thwart terrorist attacks by recruiting people in support organizations—for example, those who produce false passports, supply weapons, make bombs or provide vehicles. With the cooperation of these operatives, terrorists' guns and bombs, according to one authority, have been "spiked"—secretly doctored so that they failed in an attack.

Given the magnitude of the challenge they face, American intelligence officials concede that their successes have been modest and partial. They warn that President Reagan has scant hope of implementing a policy of swift retaliation unless spying on terrorists is far more effective. □

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