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Terrorists winning war, say experts

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WASHINGTON — One expert calls this the Age of Terrorism — and last week's news stories support his claim.

Throughout the week, the world hung on the developments in the Beirut hostage crisis, where 40 American tourists and airline crew members remained the captives of the Shiite Muslim fanatics who hijacked their plane nine days ago.

Other terrorist incidents erupted with numbing frequency: Bullets killed four off-duty U.S. Marines and two American civilians in El Salvador. A bomb killed three and devastated the airport-departure terminal in Frankfurt, West Germany. Explosions rocked the royal palace in Katmandu, Nepal; downtown Bogota, Colombia; suburban Jerusalem; and Tripoli, Lebanon.

POLITICIANS AND experts are divided over what to do, but there is agreement that terrorism is war — and that, so far, the terrorists are winning.



L. Bruce Laingen was charge d'affaires in the U.S. Embassy in Iran in 1979. For 444 days, he remained America's top-ranking hostage.

"This is the central strategic challenge to the United States," agreed Yonah Alexander, director of the State University of New York's Institute for the Study of International Terrorism.

"It is a new kind of war," said L. Bruce Laingen, "and our side is having trouble getting organized for it." Now vice-president of the National Defense University, Laingen

"The next war is not going to be fought on the battlefield between the United States and the Soviet Union — this is it," he said.

THOUGH TERRORISTS come in varieties ranging from Muslim religious fundamentalists to the atheist Marxists of the Italian Red Brigade, they share a ruthless willingness to use violence against innocent people.

Increasingly, they are aided by governments who think they can use a terrorist faction to further their own aims.

As a result, Alexander labeled this a new Age of Terrorism — and predicted that the first incidence of nuclear terrorism may not be far away.

Robert Oakley, director of the State Department's Office for Anti-Terrorism and Emergency Planning, prophetically predicted just days before the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 that "a broader spectrum of citizens will be the victims of terrorist attacks" as terrorists move on from traditional targets like diplomats and businessmen. He added that attacks are likely to become more violent and further grotesque elements are liable to emerge. Three years ago, he noted, car bombs were virtually unknown.

OAKLEY POINTED out that terrorist incidents within the United States have been decreasing. He credited tighter border controls, work by the FBI and aversion by the American people to foreign-inspired violence. For the United States, he predicted, the problem will continue to be terrorism abroad against its citizens, not actions at home.

But Alexander is much less certain. "The future looks very gloomy," he said in his Washington office. The spread of technology and the sophistication of terrorist groups may mean that nuclear blackmail, conducted by a radical group gaining a bomb or seizing a reactor, may occur soon.

"Now, they are holding an airliner hostage," he said. "Tomorrow, they may hold a city hostage."

The key to restraining terrorism Alexander said, is finding a way to stop state-supported terrorism.

"Terrorism cannot flourish in a vacuum," he said. "Granted, you would have some Shiite terrorism, for example, in any case. But you would not have modern terrorism in its present form," without outside support, largely from the Iran and the Soviet Union and its surrogates.

EIGHTY PERCENT of terrorist movements profess some form of Marxist ideology, he said, largely to obtain Soviet weapons and aid.

There are differences over what to do and

even what can be done about the problem. Emotionally, the experts said, the pressures to hit back hard at somebody — anybody — are intense. Some also said it is important psychologically to strike.

"The idea that you can't use force against fanatics," Alexander said, "especially religious fanatics, is wrong. Absolutely wrong. Communities and nation-states are there to survive, even Iran. International life is based on one single element — reciprocity."

Robert Kupperman, a counterterrorism authority with Georgetown University's Center for Strategic Studies, is not so sure.

"I cannot say we ought not to retaliate," he said, "but we have to be very careful." Hitting the wrong target may produce new terrorists, he cautioned.

KUPPERMAN AGREED that this is war, but he is scornful of the military establishment's lack of imagination and flexibility in preparing for it.

"With a very few exceptions," he said, "every general I've ever met only wanted to refight World War II — the last one we won — just with better technology." Once, he added, a four-star general said to him, pounding his fist in frustration, "Why won't they (terrorists) just come out and fight like men?"

Traditional honor may be with the general, but common sense backs the terrorist, observed Middle East expert Daniel Pipes.

"Tactically," he said, "it makes perfect sense for them to use terror — how else can a small power fight against a great power?" So far, he said, the terrorists have done an excellent job with the means at their disposal, while civilization has been slow to respond to the challenge.

NOT, OF course, that there are not elaborate, costly support systems behind terrorist operations like the one in Beirut, operations that require assistance from established nations, Kupperman and Alexander both said.

"Modern terrorism requires considerable sophistication," Kupperman said. "They have to have safe houses, in this case they had to have a long-range plan. The key question here is, was there Syrian and Iranian involvement? I don't think we know."

He said that if and when the government does know who is behind any terrorist incident, we better have a firm plan in mind before uttering threats. Worst of all, Kupperman and other students of terrorism agreed, are cases where the civilized world indulges in breast-beating, only to do nothing.

SUCH WAS the case when the Marine headquarters in Beirut was bombed in October 1983. President Reagan vowed revenge.

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but nothing was done, and Washington backed out of a planned joint-reprisal raid with France.

"What do we do if it is Iran?" behind the hostage crisis, Kupperman asked impatiently. For strategic reasons, Washington might find itself unable to strike.

If so, he noted that ~~the~~ United States is once again put in the position of appearing to be a paper tiger."

Western nations never should have an announced policy spelling out exactly what they will do in the event of a terrorist incident, Kupperman said. In many cases, the most prudent course of action may be covert.

"Since we aren't in the assassination business," he said, "we have to use proxies, and ours ain't quite as good as some." He noted the March 8 incident where Lebanese forces friendly to Western interests launched a car bomb with disastrous results.

THE BOMB was meant for Sheik Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah, a Shiite leader. It missed him, and killed 80 other people. The CIA, which allegedly had been planning to train Arabs for such operations, has denied charges that it assisted in the incident.

Governments have to be convinced that terrorism is not a policy they will be permitted to use, the experts said.

"Security is obviously essential," Alexander said, "and starts as a state of mind. What kind of security are we willing to buy — at what price?"

"Are we willing to have more wiretapping? Preemptive strikes against terrorist bases? Will they be willing to stop drawing lines," behind which aggressors can function with impunity?"

WHETHER OR not those are the right answers. Alexander emphasized that something has to be done.

"It is unbelievable," he said, "all the missiles Mr. Reagan has added, and the United States has to put up concrete barriers around the White House — psychological walls of Jericho."

Though they are critical of efforts to curb terrorism, few experts criticized Mr. Reagan's handling of the crisis. The concern now, Alexander said, has to be for the attempted safe return of the hostages.

"The United States has to continue to negotiate directly and through intermediaries," Alexander said.

YET HE is critical of the administration's "lack of a clear coherent policy as to what it is willing to do."

Understandably, the government thinks its critics are being too harsh.

"The problem is with the nature of terrorism, not with the administration," Oakley said. Three weeks ago, he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that despite government efforts, "we will not always succeed. Given the nature of the problem, you will be far more aware of our failures than our successes."

YET OAKLEY admitted that the situation may get worse before it gets better. Capitalism, in the form of a flourishing world-arms market, has seen to it that cheap and efficient weapons are available to potential terrorists. The strong dollar means more Americans than ever are traveling, especially by air, and hence are subject to the threat.

"The media — mass communications — also ensure instantaneous publicity for terrorist acts," Oakley said. Government officials last week were livid, blaming the media, particularly television, for creating a circus atmosphere and providing the terrorists with a worldwide forum to present their demands.

"I'm hesitant to say this," former-hostage Laingen said Thursday, "but I wish we could find some way of restraining this that would be consistent with our nature as a free society and the public's right to know."

Communist and other police states have fewer terrorist episodes, he said, partly because government control of media denies terrorists access to an automatic soapbox.