

“A New Dimension of Trouble for the Near East:” Lyndon B. Johnson and Counterterrorism

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“I’m going to kill you; I am a sick man.” The young man saying these words pointed a shiny, silver-plated .45 automatic at the white-haired gentleman he passed on the way to the front of the plane. Senator James O. Eastland, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, had just left his seat to go to the lavatory when the gunman pushed past him. Eastland hurried back to his seat but did not think he was a target. “[H]e wanted to get to the cockpit,” the senator later told reporters, “and I just happened to be in his way.” Once inside the cockpit the hijacker, Oran Daniel Richard, ordered the plane flown to Havana.¹

Eastland was not alone in staying calm. There was no panic as word spread among the other 47 passengers that their plane was being diverted. “Most people thought we were going to Havana just from the way the plane was turning and where the sun was,” recalled Eastland who had boarded the flight in Baltimore on July 12, 1968, for a trip to Houston. In the summer of 1968 Americans flying to destinations in the American south knew that there was a real possibility that their plane would be hijacked to Cuba. This Delta Airlines flight was the eighth commercial jetliner hijacked in the United States that year alone. Since 1961, the year the first US commercial plane was hijacked, 21 planes had been commandeered in flight and all but one had been taken to Havana.²

¹ UPI, “Gunman is Foiled in Jet Hijacking,” *The New York Times*, 13 July 1968; UPI, “Plane Hijacker is Held in Miami,” 14 July 1968, *The New York Times*.

² FAA, “Chronology of Hijackings of US Registered Aircraft,” 7 November 1972, “Hijackings Part II,” NSC 331, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.

Hijackings to Cuba were so frequent that US pilots flying in the southern United States routinely carried maps of Havana's Jose Marti Airport. The Swiss Embassy in Washington, which handled US official messages to the Cuban government, had forms prepared to use whenever Washington wished to formally request the return of a hijacked plane, its crew and passengers. All the Swiss needed to do was to fill in the flight number and date the request.³

Even at the White House there was a sense that commercial hijackings had become routine. President Lyndon B. Johnson received a report whenever a US commercial airliner was hijacked from his National Security Council staff. In February 1968, when a Delta flight from Chicago to Miami was being hijacked to Cuba, an NSC staffer had reported to Johnson that two US Air Force 104s had taken off to escort the commercial jet out of US airspace. "Recent Cuban practice," reported the staffer, "has been to allow the hijacked planes to return within a day or so."⁴ The implication was that though the incident had to be monitored, it was not a cause for Presidential concern.

The plane carrying Senator Eastland did not end up in Cuba. The pilots managed to talk the gunman out of carrying through with the hijacking. Richard, who had once been institutionalized at the Columbus [Ohio] State Mental Hospital, gave himself up to the authorities when the plane landed in Miami.

In a different time, the attempted hijacking of a plane carrying a US Senator might well have created a groundswell in favor of new laws. Senator Eastland spoke for many in 1968, however, when he suggested there was no need for legislative remedies. "We've got all the laws that we need." Instead Eastland blamed the Warren Court for the hijacking problem. "It's all the Supreme Court's affair – they make it possible for criminals to run wild." In Eastland's eyes, laws to improve air security would be an unnecessary restriction on personal liberty. "I don't think any laws Congress might pass would have anything to do with it... That's like these gun laws."⁵

Since 1961 hijacking had been a federal crime carrying the death penalty and punishable from twenty years in prison. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations had

³ Robert D. McFadden, "Airlines Trying Number of Ways to Foil Hijackers," The New York Times, 20 January 1969.

⁴ Memo, Bob Sayre, 21 February 1968, NSF Country File, Cuba, "Hijacked airliners," LBJL.

⁵ "Eastland Says Courts, Not Laws, Are At Fault," The Washington Post, Times Herald," 14 July 1968.

been reluctant to treat hijacking as anything other than a domestic criminal matter. When the International Civil Aviation Organization, an arm of the United Nation that oversaw international regulations for air traffic, produced a convention in 1963 mandating that the country where a hijacked planes landed return the plane and passengers promptly, the United States signed the convention but as of July 1968 the White House had not yet submitted the convention to the US Congress for ratification. Neither the Kennedy nor the Johnson administration had chosen to expend any political capital on the problem.

After the first rash of hijackings, President Kennedy's FAA commissioner Najeeb Halaby recommended the arming of flight crews and the posting of undercover federal air marshals on flights. The FAA, however, chose neither to require compliance from the airlines nor to seek legislative remedies. Consequently, Halaby's proposals produced few results. The FAA initiated the training of federal marshals at an airfield in Texas, but reluctance from both the airlines and the Air Line Pilots Association stymied the development of any effective air marshal program. The pilots and the airlines feared the possibility of a shootout at 20,000 feet more than an increase in the rate of hijackings. In the popular 1964 movie *Goldfinger*, James Bond brought down a business jet by piercing the fuselage with a bullet. Despite the fact that a commercial jetliner could withstand many bullet holes without a structural collapse, pilots and even the FAA believed that this fantasy represented a real threat to airplanes. Pilots were instructed to obey hijackers, who were believed to be either mentally ill or admirers of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, or both.⁶ No one had ever died in a domestic hijacking and it was assumed that this trend would continue. Why tempt fate by placing additional armed men in the air?

Efforts by the FAA to seek voluntary compliance in 1968 with a program of installing bullet-proof cockpit doors were equally unsuccessful. Airplane manufacturers intentionally constructed cockpit doors out of flimsy materials so that pilots could kick them down in the event that they needed to escape. The doors were also made to be collapsible to permit rapid in-flight recompression between the cockpit and the cabin. Finally, cockpit doors were routinely left open during takeoff and landings, the two most dangerous periods in a flight. The pilots and the airlines opposed the FAA's

⁶ "Hijackings Worry Cubans in Miami," *The New York Times*., 7 July 1968.

recommendation in the belief that a hijacker could just as easily force his way into the cockpit by taking a stewardess hostage, a scenario which had already occurred in some hijackings.⁷

Besides these failed efforts at voluntary compliance by the FAA, the Federal government's effort to avert hijacking consisted of a Justice Department program instituted in 1962 to offer a 10,000 award for anyone who provided a tip that prevented a hijacking.⁸ This program also proved a failure -- not one reward was ever paid in the 1960's.

These failures had no discernible political consequences. By the late 1960s, the FAA had concluded there was little that could be done to prevent hijackings. "It's an impossible problem," said an FAA spokesman in the summer of 1968, "short of searching every passenger."⁹ In 1968, "searching every passenger" seemed a fantastic overreaction to the apparent threat. There was as yet no screening at airports: no metal detectors, no checks on passengers or their luggage. The other key interest groups in commercial aviation agreed with the FAA. The pilots and the airlines argued that the only practicable solution was to reach an agreement with the Castro government that required the Cubans to return the hijackers as well as the plane.¹⁰ Air travel was not yet a mass phenomenon in the United States. Only 15 million Americans flew each year. The airlines feared competition from trains and worried about the added inconvenience and costs that would come from a mandatory screening program. The White House, the US Congress and the press, the unelected branch of government, all seemed to agree; or at least showed little interest in a different approach.

After the tenth US commercial jetliner of 1968 was hijacked on July 19, the FAA began sending a very small number of armed plain-clothed officers on board selected flights headed to Florida.¹¹ In retrospect the July 19 hijacking brought evidence of

⁷ John Sibley, "Airline and FAA Officials Seek Means to Counter Hijackers," The New York Times, 18 July 1968; Andrew Wilson, "Air Hijackings Stirring Wide Concern," The Washington Post, Times Herald, 14 August 1968.

⁸ Claude Koprowski, "Airlines Study Anti-Hijacking Plan," The Washington Post, Times Herald, 24 January 1969.

⁹ "Deterring the Hijackers," The Washington Post, Times Herald, 20 July 1968.

¹⁰ John Sibley, "Airline and FAA Officials Seek means to Counter Hijackers," The New York Times, 18 July 1968.

¹¹ "Federal Agents Ride Planes In Effort to Stop Hijackings," The New York Times, 20 July 1968.

another large gap in the federal approach to the problem, though it did not provoke any immediate remedies. Although the Federal Bureau of Investigation had jurisdiction over hijacking, since the first of these crimes in 1961 the Bureau had not developed any special team to manage these incidents. When the tenth hijacked plane of 1968 landed in New Orleans to refuel before continuing to Havana, FBI officers – lacking any training in airplane rescue operations -- could only watch helplessly as the plane continued on its way.¹²

Besides the knee-jerk reaction to put a few sky marshals aloft, the rash of domestic hijackings in July 1968 provoked only the most minimal discussion within the Johnson administration over the problem of air piracy. On July 19, the Interagency Group on International Aviation, comprising representatives from the Departments of State, Defense, Justice and Transportation, decided it was time that the United States ratified the Tokyo convention and drafted a Presidential message for approval and submission to the Senate.¹³

As a charter member of ICAO, it well past time for Washington to do this. No records on the Interagency Group's deliberations have been found; but it seems likely that the Group had in mind more than a symbolic gesture against air piracy. As of mid-1968, hijacking was not an international problem. It was an almost entirely an American problem that involved only one sanctuary for hijackers and that was Cuba. The Johnson administration appears to have made no effort to contact Cuba over this issue or to seek the assistance of allies, all of whom maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba, to pressure the Castro government to alter its policy on sheltering hijackers. Ratification of the ICAO convention would have put a spotlight on Cuban misbehavior, without involving the administration in any diplomacy with the regime. As we shall see, Washington had other reasons not to want to deal with Havana.

The El Al Hijacking

¹² Ben Funk, "Jet Forces to Cuba With Gun, Grenade," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, 18 July 1968.

¹³ "Message to the Senate for Signature by the President," an enclosure to Reed to Walt Rostow, 6 September 1968, "Convention on Offenses and Certain Other Acts Committed on Board Aircraft," Office Files of Ernest Goldstein, Box 10, LBJL.

A recurrent theme through the history of US counterterrorism strategy is that some events more than others would have the power to sharply change the ways US policymakers and the interested public viewed the problem of terrorism. The first of these came on July 23, 1968, only four days after the Johnson administration began looking for international support to solve its Cuban problem. That day Palestinian gunmen took over a plane belonging to El Al, Israel's national airline, while en route to Tel Aviv from Rome. The hijackers forced the plane to land in Algeria. All non-Israeli passengers were allowed to leave the plane, among whom were two US citizens. The Israelis, including the crew, were held as prisoners of war. Although it was never proved that the Algerian government had foreknowledge of the hijacking, once the plane landed in Algiers, it became a full party to the crime.

Despite Israeli requests that Washington take a public stance against the hijackers, the US government chose to work quietly through diplomatic channels to help Israel secure the release of the plane and the hostages.¹⁴ On July 24, the State Department cabled US embassies in Rome, Paris and Cairo with instructions to ask the local governments to apply pressure to the Algerian government. Since the end of the Sixth Day War of 1967, the US did not have diplomatic relations with Algeria. US diplomats were to convey to the leaders of Italy, France and Egypt the concern that “ [it would be] a serious blow to international civil air transport...if hijacking of El Al aircraft were permitted to stand.”¹⁵

The El Al hijacking altered the way in which the Johnson administration viewed the problem of air piracy. Hijacking moved from being largely US-Cuban matter into an issue of international concern. Not only did this incident signify the exportation of the violent politics of the Middle East but this was the first time that hijackers had taken hostages. Up to that point, hijacking could be dismissed as largely a victimless crime, whose costs were inconvenience and financial. Not any longer. The El Al incident

¹⁴ DOS, Cable, “El Al Aircraft Hijacking,” 24 July 1968, National Security Archive, Counterterrorism Microfiche (2003) [Henceforth NSArch-CT].

¹⁵ Ibid.

brought the realization that crew and the passengers could themselves become the targets of the crime.

This incident created a fissure in the coalition of complacency that had characterized the world aviation community. In its wake, a powerful interest group in the fight against terrorism first found its voice. Until July 23, 1968, airline pilots and their union had remained remarkably aloof from the discussion of hijacking. In the United States, the Air Line Pilots Association [ALPA] had largely agreed with the FAA's handling of the issue, including the reluctance to put armed marshals on board planes. Algeria's blatant disregard for the civil rights of the El Al crew and passengers had sent a shiver through the pilot community.

After the Israelis had spent a month in captivity, the International Federation of Airline Pilots threatened the government of Algeria with a strike. French and Italian pilots warned their national airlines that if the Israelis were not released they would refuse to fly to Algeria. The International Transport Workers Federation also announced it would no longer service Algerian planes at major international airports.¹⁶ Fearful of the loss of air traffic, Algiers gave in and released the hostages on September 1.¹⁷

The victory in Algiers emboldened American commercial pilots to seek Federal assistance with the domestic problem of hijackings to Cuba. The pilots' ability to organize also drew the attention of the Cuba government, which had been ambivalent toward the string of unexpected hijackers that they had received. By late September the Castro government was signaling that it wanted a deal with Washington on procedures by which to handle these hijackings.¹⁸

Terrorism as a Concept

Despite this new awareness of the vulnerability of airline passengers, the Johnson administration did not identify the El Al incident as the opening shot in an international struggle against terrorism. The terms terrorist and terrorism were in use in the

¹⁶ "European Pilots Boycott Algeria Over Hijacking of Israeli Plane," The Washington Post, Times Herald, 14 August 1968.

¹⁷ Alvin Shuster, "Hijacking and What Can Be Done About It," The New York Times, 18 August 1968.

¹⁸ Reuters, "Cuba Willing to Sign Accord on Air Hijacks," The Washington Post, Times Herald, 22 September 1968.

Administration well before July 1968 but they meant different things to different advisors. Walt Rostow, Johnson's special assistant for national security affairs used the word terrorist interchangeably with the terms "insurgent" or "guerrilla." In a September 1968 report to President Johnson, for example, he described the "terrorist incidents in Saigon" in reference to Viet Cong attacks on civilians.¹⁹ The CIA, which had the principal responsibility for collecting information on these foreign organizations, used the term somewhat differently. In CIA reports to the Johnson White House "terrorism" denoted certain kinds of tactics – torture or the indiscriminate killing of civilians -- more than it did the character of those groups. The term was used to describe the actions of friendly governments as well as those of communist insurgencies or guerrillas.²⁰

The concept of international terrorism had also not yet been born. The Johnson administration tended to terrorist actions as regional phenomena. In South Vietnam and Latin America, where US personnel were directly by those who adopted terrorist tactics, the US response dating back to the Kennedy administration was to increase overt and covert support for what was known as regional counterinsurgency. In mid-1967, for example, the Johnson administration oversaw counterinsurgency programs in seven Latin American countries – Bolivia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru and Venezuela.²¹ Specialists from the Department of Defense and US AID trained special counterinsurgency battalions in the state's army and rural police units.

The United States understood that these groups had state sponsors. In Southeast Asia, the Viet Cong included members of the North Vietnamese army and received funding from the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China as well as Hanoi. Soviet support for Latin American revolutionary movements was more circumscribed but the significant assistance from Cuba was not. The Johnson administration viewed the deaths of US citizens caused by these state-sponsored groups as the unavoidable casualties of the Cold War.

¹⁹ WWR to LBJ, 7 September 1968, NSF Memos to the President, Box 39 [1 of 2], "Volume 93 Sept 1 – 11 [1 of 2]," Document 48, LBJL.

²⁰ CIA, Intelligence Information Cable, 7 July 1967, Document 103a, NSF CO:Guatemala, Box 54, "Guatemala Memos & Misc, Vol. II. LBJL.

²¹ Bowdler to WW Rostow, 5.07.67, "Guerrilla Problems in Latin America," NSF Intelligence File, LBJ Library.

Noting illustrates this attitude better than Washington's reaction to a wave of terrorism in Guatemala in 1967-1968. With training assistance and helicopters from the United States, the Guatemalan government had launched a counteroffensive against the Cuban-backed insurgency in late 1966. By early 1967, the government had eliminated the offensive capability of the rural FAR [Rebel Armed Forces] and had turned its attention to the movement's urban "nerve center." Within a few months the government was enjoying similar success in the cities. Nevertheless, 200 hardcore FAR guerrillas remained.

The CIA acknowledged that the Guatemalan government's success came at great cost to Guatemalan society. "There is little doubt," the Agency noted in July 1967, "that the success of the urban campaign has been largely attributable to government-sanctioned police and military terrorism...The assassinations and terrorist bombings by the Special Commando Units of the Guatemalan army, coupled with the propaganda bombardment of threatened assassinations, has served to keep the community left in a strictly defense posture...."²²

The CIA explained to the NSC staff that despite these short-term gains it wondered whether the Guatemalan government would ultimately lose control of the violence that it had unleashed. In reporting this information to the President the National Security Advisor glossed over the CIA's comments about Guatemalan state terrorism, choosing instead to write in a celebratory manner that the cable "shows what a democratic, popular government can do when it is determined to take firm action." Rostow also celebrated the role of the US in "providing equipment, training [redacted] to the military and police which has helped them ferret out the guerrillas and terrorists."²³ In 1967, the US Department of Defense gave the Guatemalan Army US 1.0 million for helicopters and communications assistance for the counterterrorism action and the State Department gave \$324,000 to support the reorganization of the police. The US

²² CIA, Intelligence Information Cable, 7 July 1967, Document 103a, NSF CO:Guatemala, Box 54, "Guatemala Memos & Misc, Vol. II. LBJL.

²³ WW Rostow to LBJ, 11 July 1967, Document 103a, NSF CO:Guatemala, Box 54, "Guatemala Memos & Misc, Vol. II. LBJL.

intelligence community also provided assistance but the amount of this assistance remains classified.²⁴

US complicity in Guatemalan counterterrorism led to a decision by the FAR to target Americans. There is no evidence that the FAR killed any US officials before the start of the Guatemalan government's brutal counteroffensive. In January 1968, the FAR killed the commander of the US military group, Colonel John Webber, and the chief of the military group's Naval Section, Lt. Commander Ernest Munro, and wounded two others. In March 1968, CIA sources reported the head of the FAR threaten to kidnap Americans to gain the release of a high-level rebel held in government jails.²⁵

CIA information on threats to American officials in Guatemala City became quite specific in July. On July 18, a CIA report that the FAR was planning attempts on the lives on US personnel, "perhaps including the ambassador," was widely disseminated to the intelligence community and to the US Embassy in Guatemala.²⁶ Nevertheless, there was no specific warning of when the attack might occur or whether the terrorists would use explosives or a sniper to kill the US ambassador John Gordon Mein.

On August 28, 1968, FAR guerrillas killed Ambassador Mein. This was the first assassination of a US ambassador in the nearly two hundred years of this country's foreign relations. President Johnson was informed immediately that the FAR were behind the killing, though the Guatemalan government quickly determined that the FAR had probably not planned to kill Mein. Initially the rebels had hoped to hold him hostage until one of their guerrilla leaders was released from jail. The Ambassador, however, had resisted capture and was killed in the struggle.²⁷

Cuba's role as a state sponsor of the FAR was well-known to US intelligence and the Johnson White House at the time of Ambassador Mein's death. In March 1968, NSC staffer W. G. Bowdler warned National Security Advisor Walt Whitman Rostow that the

²⁴ W.G. Bowdler to WWR, "Our 4:30 Meeting on Subversion in Latin America," 5 July 1967, Document 1, NSF Intelligence File, Box 2, "Guerrilla Problem in Latin America," LBJL.

²⁵ CIA, Intelligence Memorandum, "The Communist Insurgency Movement in Guatemala," 20 September 1968, NSF CO:Guatemala, Box 54, "Guatemala Cables [1 of 2], Volume II, 1/66 - 11/68, LBJL.

²⁶ CIA, Intelligence Memorandum, "Assassination of US Ambassador to Guatemala," 29 August 1968, NSF CO:Guatemala, Box 54, "Guatemala Cables [1 of 2], Vol. II, 1/66 - 11/68, LBJL.

²⁷ White House Situation Room to Tom Johnson, "[Excised] on the Assassination of US Ambassador to Guatemala [excised]," 29 August 1968, NSF CO:Guatemala, Box 54, "Guatemala Cables [2 of 2], Volume II, 1/66 -11/68, Document 40.

Cubans were “fishing in troubled waters again” and that they were behind the recent increase in terrorist activity in the country.²⁸ CIA sources in the Guatemalan party reported in March 1968 that elements of the FAR were “bragging that they will carry out a campaign of sabotage and violence, including the assassination of US personnel and Guatemalan army officers.”²⁹

Cuba was already considered an enemy of the United States and there is no available evidence in the public domain that Mein’s assassination led to increased covert activity against Cuba or to a more overt warning to the Cuban leadership about the consequences of their surrogates targeting US personnel. By the summer of 1968, the Johnson administration had already communicated to the intelligence agencies its belief that the country’s covert action “platter was full.”³⁰ In the previous 18 months, the 303 committee, a principals group that supervised US covert action, had considered 33 operations in Latin America alone. The Mein killing likely did not result in any covert response at all.

In the Middle East, unlike Latin America, the Johnson administration did not view terrorism through the prism of the US-Soviet cold war struggle. Even before the El Al hijacking, US national security officials and intelligence experts had noted the use of terrorism as a tool of Palestinian nationalists to undermine Israel.³¹ But in this region, unlike Southeast Asia or Latin America, these actions were not directed at the United States, nor were US personnel, either in the region or at home, considered at risk. So, the study of Palestinian radicals belonged to the greater problem of pacifying the Arab-Israel conflict.

Washington concluded that terrorism in the Middle East was a product of two different factors. The most important was a struggle between radical Arab regimes and

²⁸ Memo, Bowdler to WWR, 8 March 1968, Document 97, NSF CO:Guatemala, Box 54, “Guatemala Memos & Misc, Vol. II. LBJL.

²⁹ CIA, Intelligence Information Cable, 7 March 1968, Document 97a, NSF CO:Guatemala, Box 54, “Guatemala Memos & Misc, Vol. II. LBJL.

³⁰ Peter Jessup, to Chairman of PFIAB and Members, “Minutes of 303 Meetings for Past 90-Day Period,” 4 June 1968, NSF Intelligence File, Box 2, “303 Committee,” Document 18a, LBJL. The platter quote came from Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

³¹ Saunders to WWR, “Mid-East Terrorism,” 11 November 1967, NSF Name File, Box 7, “Saunders Memos [1 of 2], Document 20a, LBJL

more moderate regimes over the future direction of regional politics. Gamal Abd'l Nasser's bid to unite the Arab world under Egyptian leadership had unsettled an already unstable region.³²

The other factor was the Palestinian problem, which affected both the stability of Israel and neighboring Jordan. King Hussein's predecessor King Abdullah had annexed the West Bank in 1951 over the objections of both Israel and fellow Arab states. The 400,000 inhabitants of the West Bank were a largely urban, literate population that had received administrative training under British colonial rule. In the original UN plan for Palestine the Arabs of the West Bank were expected to enjoy autonomy as part of the Arab sector of Palestine. But Jordan, then called Trans-Jordan, coveted the West Bank. A largely unpopulated desert country, Jordan had half the number of people as the West Bank. Although it had phosphate reserves, the country had no oil and needed the arable land of the West Bank and access to the tourist sites in Jerusalem to prosper. King Abdullah's decision to annex the West Bank and its inhabitants in 1951 improved the Jordanian economy but created a Palestinian problem for Jordan as well as Israel.

By 1968, Jordan had a population of approximately 2 million people, two-thirds of whom were Palestinian. In its analyses of Jordan, the CIA termed Amman, the Jordanian capital, "a Palestinian city." Since the mid-1950s, it had been US policy to support Abdullah's successor King Hussein. By 1968, it was generally accepted that Hussein, whose regime received 45 million dollars a year in grants and loans, remained in power because of US support. In late-1966, the US intelligence community had estimated that the United States had already invested half a billion dollars to keep Jordan afloat.³³

The Palestinian issue was a political football for the Arabs. In 1964, Nasser decided to create a Palestinian government-in-exile, which Cairo could use to put pressure on both Israel and Jordan. Called the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the PLO was a loose coalition of Palestinian activist from political moderates through

³² CIA, Weekly Review, Special Report, "Anti-Israeli Arab Terrorist Organizations," 4 October 1968, NSF CO: Israel, Box 142, "Israel Memos [2 of 4], Vol. X, 6/68 - 11/68; Saunders to WWR, "Mid-East Terrorism," 11 November 1967, NSF Name File, Box 7, "Saunders Memos [1 of 2], Document 20a, LBJL; CIA, Intelligence Memorandum, "The Arab-Israeli Confrontation - Autumn 1968," 23 September 1968, NSF CO: Middle East, Box 104, "Middle East [1 of 3], Vol. II 4/68 - 1/69, Document 2, LBJL.

³³ CIA, ONE, Memorandum for the Director, 13 December 1966, "The Jordan Regime: Its prospects and the Consequences of its Demise." "Jordan Memos, Volume III 12/66-5/67," NSF Country Files Middle East, Box 146, LBJL.

radicals who espoused violence to defeat both Hussein and the Israelis. A young former student of the University of Cairo headed Al FATAH [Henceforth Fatah], the most radical faction within the PLO – Fatah was an acronym for the Arabic translation of Palestine Liberation Movement. Yasir Arafat came to the attention of the CIA in the mid-1964. “He was not thought of much of a problem then,” recalled James Critchfield, who served as chief of the CIA’s Near East Division from 1960-1968.³⁴

Fatah ultimately established its base of operations in Syria. Egyptian relations with Syria were not as difficult as those between Amman and Cairo, but they were not that easy. Arafat played the Syrians off the Egyptians. As Nasser began seeking a less confrontational course with the West, Fatah turned increasingly to the Syrians for training and material support for paramilitary operations against Israel and Jordan. In 1966 Arafat’s terrorists launched raids into Israel from Syria. The Syrians prohibited the Fatah guerrillas from entering Israel directly from Syria, fearing a direct Israeli reprisal. Instead Fatah used the largely un-policed Jordanian desert as its route to Israeli villages.

By 1968, Fatah had grown to between 3,000 – 5,000 guerrillas and was receiving assistance from across the Arab world and the Soviet Bloc. Most of the money came from wealthy Palestinians in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, supplemented by assistance arranged by both governments. The Saudis levied a 5% income tax on all Palestinians and Kuwait sent to the Palestinians the proceeds from a 2% tax on gasoline and theater tickets. The Soviet Bloc provided weapons and training. In July 1968, Arafat accompanied Nasser to Moscow. Besides Soviet aid, Arafat received a little assistance from the Chinese. Beijing trained a few Fatah fighters.

Fatah was not the only Palestinian faction to employ terrorism. In October 1967, a Marxist-Leninist named George Habbash established the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Having about 500 men under his command, Habbash decided to cooperate with Arafat and PFLP training in 1968 took place at some Fatah camps. The hijackers of the El Al plane in July were from the PFLP.

³⁴ Interview with James Critchfield, 18 August 2001.

In 1966-68, the United States tried to help its allies Israel and Jordan control Palestinian terrorists. The United States took the lead in using diplomatic pressure on Syria, which consistently denied sponsorship of the guerrillas. The United States also sought to facilitate Israeli-Jordanian conversations. Although both countries had been having secret meetings since the time of Abdullah, this relationship was complex and benefited from American efforts.

The United States understood from the start that very little good could come from unilateral Israel efforts to control the Palestinian border-crossers. It posed a direct threat to the stability of Jordan, one of the few moderate Arab regimes in the region. Nevertheless, because Israel did not trust the Jordanians to control their own borders Jerusalem regularly chose unilateral military retaliation to disrupt Fatah operations. After Israel occupied West Bank and Syria's Golan Heights following the June 1967 war, the PLO had even more targets to hit and now these were even closer to their training camps in Syria and their forward bases in Jordan. Mid-east experts in the Johnson White House and in the State department agreed that Israeli use of military means to fight terrorism would harmful to any future Arab-Israeli peace process.

In the wake of the El Al hijacking, the Israeli government cautioned the United States that it signified a troubling shift in Palestinian tactics. Israeli diplomat Shlomo Argov explained to the Acting Assistant Secretary of State that "this was a new dimension of trouble for [the] Near East."³⁵ Two months later, the Israeli warning seemed to be coming true. A Lebanese source told an Embassy officer that "Arab commando groups were giving thought to expanding their activities outside the Middle East into countries that support Israel." This source warned, in particular that Arab terrorists were considering "dispatching commandos on assassination missions against high-level leaders 'who have adopted pro-Israeli positions' such as President Johnson, Vice President Humphrey and Richard Nixon."³⁶ Although the source did not link the assassination of Robert F.

³⁵DOS, Cable, "El Al Aircraft Hijacking," 24 July 1968, National Security Archive.

³⁶ Beirut to DOS, "Possibility Arab Terrorist Activities in US," 16 October 1968, NSF CO:Middle East, Box 149, Document 226, LBJL.

Kennedy in June 1968 by a disgruntled Palestinian named Sirhan Sirhan to Fatah or any of the other groups, he warned that future political assassinations were possible.

The information from Beirut was given by the NSC to the Secret Service but did not occasion any White House policy review.³⁷ And just as in the case of the Johnson administration's handling of the Cuban involvement in the Mein assassination, it is unlikely there was a covert response to the increased radicalization of this regional enemy of the United States. Covert action in the Middle East was considered very hard and the CIA's efforts there were largely restricted to collection.³⁸ The intelligence representative on the 303 committee, Peter Jessup, does not recall any new covert action against the PLO in 1968-69.³⁹ For all these new activity and the threatening chatter, the Johnson administration left office seeing the PLO as a regional actor that could cause headaches but little else for Israel. It was not a mortal threat to the Jewish State, let alone to the United States.

President Johnson, who had extended the writ of the Federal government in so many other areas of American life, did not use his remaining months in office to do battle with southern Democrats on the issue of air safety. He also did not use these months to assign the United States a role in protecting Israel from Fatah or to step up the US covert war with Havana. He would leave these challenges to his successor, Richard Nixon.

³⁷ Telcon with Harold Saunders, 15 February 2004. Saunders was the NSC staffer who forwarded the cable to the White House Situation Room assuming it would go to the Secret Service.

³⁸ Peter Jessup to Chairman of PFIAB and Members, 4 June 1968, , "Minutes of 303 Meetings for Past 90-Day Period," 4 June 1968, NSF Intelligence File, Box 2, "303 Committee," Document 18a, LBJL.

³⁹ Telcon with Peter Jessup, 2 February 2004. He also did not recall any covert action against Cuba in reaction to the Mein killing.