The Power of Presence: Nixon, Israel, and the Black September Crisis
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Although the Arab-Israeli conflict has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention in recent years, the 1970 Black September Crisis remains one of the most understudied and misunderstood events of the Cold War era. The existing scholarship on "Black September," which predominantly views the Crisis as an extension of the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars, fails to analyze the Crisis' significance within the broader struggle between the Nixon administration and its Soviet counterparts. While the outbreak of civil war in Jordan was certainly the product of unresolved hostility in the region, the conflict's escalation to an international confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union was actually the result of a broadening struggle for influence. What began as a regional crisis quickly transformed into what National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger would later call, "a test of the American capacity to control events in the region."[1] This paper will analyze the Nixon Administration's use of increasingly assertive language and behavior to interpret its strategic methodology. Though the United States was hesitant to commit troops to Jordan due to its cumbersome military commitments in Southeast Asia, the Nixon Administration employed a composite of firm diplomatic posturing and the display of overt military signals to publicly demonstrate an uncompromised military capability in the Middle East. The United States' handling of the crisis was consistent with the Nixon Administration's affinity toward heavy-handed diplomacy. By publicly demonstrating a seeming willingness to intervene militarily, the United States effectively asserted its commitment to Jordan and deterred a potentially serious military altercation in the Middle East.

The indeterminate end to the Arab-Israeli War in June of 1967 set the stage for a state of perpetual conflict in the Middle East. Though Israel had achieved a decisive military victory over Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, the failure to reach a formal peace resolution created an ideological polarization in the region that presented three lasting implications. First, the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War welcomed an enhanced Soviet presence in the region. Soviet advisers and arms shipments flooded to the area to strengthen the governments of Egypt and Syria against the threat of Western incursion. The United States responded to the increased Soviet presence by substantially increasing its military assistance to Israel and Jordan. The outcome was the creation of a regional arms race that entrenched the Arab and Israeli positions along the Sinai Peninsula. Second, Israel's refusal to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula instigated a massive militarization along the Suez Canal. Both Egypt and Israel used military aid to reinforce their respective banks along the Canal, thus creating a military stalemate not unlike the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula. Third, Israel's continued occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights created a massive displacement of the Palestine people. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees fled deep into Jordan and left the Hashemite king with the task of managing a national population comprised of a Palestinian majority. Left-leaning militant groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Fedayeen established an influential presence in Jordan that gradually eroded King Hussein's national authority. The combination of these elements destabilized an already tense environment and introduced a three-year period of isolated fighting known as the War of Attrition.[2]

Having been elected on a commitment to serve as a global leader in promoting international peace and security, President Richard Nixon made the establishment of stability in the Middle East an American priority. In June of 1970, Secretary of State William P. Rogers introduced a proposed peace agreement that claimed to effectively address both Arab and Israeli concerns. The Rogers Plan called for an immediate ceasefire and a resumption of negotiations for an Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory. Despite intense Palestinian opposition to such a resolution, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan formally agreed to the United States-sponsored ceasefire on August 7, 1970. Just as the establishment of a formal Arab-Israeli peace had begun to appear possible, Secretary Rogers' efforts were abruptly undermined by the discovery of substantial Egyptian ceasefire violations with the apparent complicity of the Soviet Union. The Nixon Administration interpreted Soviet collusion in the ceasefire violations as evidence of communist efforts to disrupt the peace process. Though the Nixon Administration rushed to prevent the Rogers initiative from unraveling, the Palestinian hijacking of four commercial aircrafts in September of 1970 thrust the peace process into utter turmoil. The hijackings presented the first in a series of escalations that together constructed an international crisis and threatened to bring the United States and Soviet Union to the brink of war.[3]

On the morning of September 6, 1970, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine seized control of three commercial aircraft and set off a regional crisis with international implications. Among the hostages were people of fourteen nationalities, though the majority were Israeli and American citizens. Seeking to maintain a united front

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[1] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), 594-600.

[2] William B. Quandt, *Decade of Decisions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 106-110.

[3] Edward H. Judge and John W. Langdon, *The Cold War: A Global History with Documents*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2011), 198-201.

in the face of global terrorism, the International Committee for the Red Cross assumed control of the ransom negotiations. The Palestinians sought to draw international attention to Israeli injustice and their group's intense opposition to the Rogers peace plan by publicly communicating an intent to exercise extreme violence. In exchange for the release of the hostages, the hijackers demanded the release of so-called Fedayeen freedom fighters incarcerated in prisons across the globe. As the Red Cross worked to secure the release of the hostages, the Nixon Administration used the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen its strategic position in the Middle East. If the United States were to return stability to the region, it would first have to bolster regional alliances by eliminating anti-Western opposition.

On September 9, 1970, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger convened a meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group to discuss the need for a military response to Palestinian radicalism in Jordan. Kissinger began the meeting by stating, "If we do not get the Fedayeen in Jordan under control, the peace initiative will go by the board. The President's instincts are to crush the Fedayeen now."[4] Though President Nixon favored an American military response to the hostage crisis, logistical restraints in the Middle East and a burdensome financial commitment to the Vietnam War had severely constrained the United States military's interventionary capability in the region. Furthermore, the use of American troops on Jordanian soil threatened to further discredit the authority of the already embattled Hashemite King. Having ruled out the use of American troops as "militarily impractical," the Nixon Administration instead settled on a course that supported Jordanian military action by providing sustained funding and moral encouragement to the Hashemite king.[5]

Though the United States believed the Jordanian army capable of defeating the Fedayeen militants, the Nixon Administration was not confident that King Hussein would risk the political repercussions that such a move would prompt from the Arab community. Richard Helms, the Director of Central Intelligence, expressed his doubt to Kissinger, saying, "He wants to avoid fighting…He is simply not willing to take on the Palestinians in his Kingdom with the possible help they would receive from the Iraqis, possibly the Syrians."[6] The determined solution was to use the visibility of American military power as a means to bolster King Hussein's confidence and dissuade the prospect of foreign intervention. This pointed to the Nixon Administration's developed strategy in Jordan. By maintaining an element of public and private encouragement for King Hussein's campaign against the Fedayeen, the United States could effectively communicate an unyielding commitment to the Middle East and, in effect, influence the outcome of events in the region.

The Nixon Administration's policy towards the Middle East in September of 1970 was to recognize Egypt, Syria, and Iraq as Soviet subordinates. Though this may have been an oversimplification, Soviet complicity in the Egyptian ceasefire violations had convinced the Nixon Administration that the Russians maintained direct and constant control over the actions of their clients. For the United States to effectively deter Syrian and Iraqi intervention, it would have to send a clear message to Moscow. At a meeting of the Washington Special Action Group on September 10, the President's advisers met to discuss the United States' capacity to "assume an intimidating posture" that could be "visible and vigorous."[7] The outcome of the meeting was a consensus that while the Nixon Administration was restricted in its capacity to respond militarily, there was an immediate need for a public reminder of the United States' presence in the Middle East. Admiral Thomas Moorer agreed, saying, "We should establish a deterrent. We can't do it half-way; we have to be convincing…We should tell the Soviets we mean business and show them by augmenting the 6th Fleet."[8] Having decided on a means to support King Hussein in a military campaign against the Fedayeen, the Nixon Administration now needed to persuade him to do so.

The detonation of three empty airliners on September 12, 1970 gave the Nixon Administration the leverage it needed to persuade King Hussein to mount a massive military campaign against the Fedayeen. Professing a desire to prevent the continuance of Palestinian violence and terrorism, Secretary Rogers communicated to the Jordanian Embassy an immediate need for King Hussein and the Jordanian government "to demonstrate to all concerned that they are able take control of the internal Jordanian situation." The Secretary expressed the Nixon Administration's concern that Fedayeen activity in Jordan had weakened the international community's confidence in the King's ability to "exercise clear-cut authority throughout the kingdom."[9] The King responded with a public display of military force on September 16, 1970. Apparently receptive to American encouragement, King Hussein and the Jordanian army launched an aggressive military campaign against the Fedayeen and drew immediate criticism throughout the Arab community.

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[4] Minutes of the Substance of Discussion, Kissinger to Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Sep. 9, 1970, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2008), Doc. 214.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Minutes of the Substance of Discussion, Helms to WSAG Meeting, Sep. 10, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 222.
[7] Minutes of the Substance of Discussion, Kissinger to WSAG Meeting, in Ibid.
[8] Minutes of the Substance of Discussion, Moorer to WSAG Meeting, in Ibid.
[9] Rogers to Sharaf, Sep. 13, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 234.

King Hussein's entrance into an all-or nothing showdown with the Fedayeen thrust the region into further turmoil. As civil war erupted in the streets of Amman on the morning of September 17, the governments of Syria and Iraq issued strong public statements warning Jordan against the potential consequences of continued military action. Syria, which still possessed considerable military capability in the region after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, was particularly adamant in its condemnation of Jordanian behavior. In a public statement that seemed to imply a willingness to respond militarily, the Syrian government announced that it "would not sit idly by while the Fedayeen were massacred."[10] The increasingly hostile Arab reaction to the Jordanian Crisis underscored the need for an American military response. With tensions in the Middle East on the verge of exploding, Kissinger communicated to the Washington Special Actions Group that "the time has come to show US strength in the area. A US show of force might even fuel the peace initiative."[11]

Seeking to deter foreign intervention in Jordan, the Nixon Administration exercised a composite of firm diplomatic posturing and overt military signals to publicly demonstrate a powerful military capability in the Middle East. The Administration responded to military threats from Syria and Iraq by providing a visible demonstration of the American naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition to moving the entire Sixth Fleet less than 100 miles from the shores of Lebanon, the Nixon Administration also redeployed the USS *John F. Kennedy* and the USS *Guam* from the Atlantic to assist in operations around the island of Crete. Speaking with Kissinger about how to best employ the Fleet as a deterrent, President Nixon said, "I want them to know we're moving. I want everything that can be done to be done in the open. The wear and tear on the nerves between the Syrians and Iraqis is very important… I want them to know we are hell bent on action."[12] In conjunction with the American military demonstration in the Mediterranean, President Nixon issued a stern statement to the *Chicago Sun Times* on September 17, 1970, which read, "If the Syrians or Iraqis intervene in Jordan there are only two of us to stop them, the Israelis or us. The Russians are going to pay dearly for moving the missiles in…We are embarking on a tougher policy in the Middle East. The Sixth Fleet is going to be beefed up. We will intervene if the situation is such that our intervention will make a difference."[13] Nixon's comment was not a political talking point; it was a premeditated statement of intention to the governments of Syria, Iraq, and the USSR. The Nixon Administration's firm posture was soon tested with the Syrian invasion of Jordan on September 19, 1970.

The Jordanian Crisis exploded into an international conflict with the Syrian invasion on September 19, 1970. Disguised as soldiers of the Palestinian Liberation Army, Syrian ground forces crossed into Jordanian territory and began directly assisting the Fedayeen militants in repelling the advance of the Jordanian Army. The United States promptly released a statement condemning Syrian involvement and called for the "immediate withdrawal of Syrian forces" from Jordanian territory.[14] Syrian forces quickly captured the large northern cities of Irbid and Ramtha and threatened Jordanian control of the capital city of Amman. Facing a rapidly deteriorating situation, King Hussein communicated a frantic plea for military assistance. In a personal message to President Nixon on September 21, 1970, the Hashemite king stated, "Situation deteriorating dangerously following Syrian massive invasion…I request immediate physical intervention both air and land. Immediate air strikes on invading forces from any quarter are imperative."[15] The Syrian occupation of Jordan created a unique problem for the Nixon Administration. King Hussein's request for assistance tested the United States' regional credibility and challenged the Nixon Administration's capacity to control events in the region.

Though Kissinger and the rest of the President's advisers had been averse to an American military response to the hijackings, the invasion of an American ally by a Soviet confidant left the Nixon Administration with very few options. A Jordanian defeat would undermine more than the success of the Rogers peace process: it would tarnish American credibility in the eyes of the world. The determined solution was to employ Israel as a regional enforcer of American interests. Unlike the United States, Israel was not constrained by an enormous military commitment to Southeast Asia. While the United States lacked the manpower, the bases, the supply lines, and the public support to effectively intervene in Jordan, Israel was ready and willing. The defense of King Hussein and the expulsion of the Fedayeen from Jordan were considered vital to long-term Israeli interests. Communicating the Nixon Administration's support of Israeli intervention if the situation "deemed it necessary," Kissinger conveyed to Israeli Ambassador Rabin that the United States

[W]ould look favorably on your actions and the President has asked me to tell you if you undertake

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[10] Jordanian Situation Report, Haig to Kissinger, Sep. 17, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 253.

[11] Minutes of the Substance of Discussion, Kissinger to WSAG Meeting, Sep. 17, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 254.

[12] Nixon telecon with Kissinger, Sep. 17, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 262.

[13] Shakespeare telecon with Kissinger, Sep. 17, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 261.

[14] Department of State, telegram 1514413 to the U.S. Embassy Amman, Sep. 20, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 276.

[15] U.S. Embassy Amman, telegram 4988 to the Department of State, Sep. 21, 1970, *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 284.

such action we would of course make good any materiel problems that might arise as a result of these actions and we are cognizant of the fact we would have to hold the situation under control vis-à-vis the Soviets.[16]

The result of this arrangement was the groundbreaking establishment of a partnership that fitted the United States and Israel into separate roles. With the Nixon Administration on the verge of a violent confrontation with the Soviet Union, the United States demonstrated its naval power as a visible deterrent while Israel served as a regional enforcer.
        Though the Nixon Administration took steps to minimize the visibility of its collusion with Israel, their arranged partnership appeared increasingly evident as the two powers moved closer towards intervention in Jordan. The looming pressure of an aligned American and Israeli military presence in the region applied sustained pressure to the governments of both Syria and the Soviet Union. The Nixon Administration's assumed posture in the crisis was to recognize Syria, Iraq, and the Soviet Union as a single entity. Speaking to the National Security Council on September 22, 1970, President Nixon reiterated that his Administration's approach to the conflict had been constructed to "underline our determination to maintain a U.S. presence and to strengthen our credibility with respect to the Soviets."[17] The Nixon Administration's decision to augment the Sixth Fleet, the maintenance of its firm diplomatic posture, and its public support for the Jordanian government had all been in pursuit of this objective. As King Hussein and the Jordanian army gradually began to gain the upper hand in the fighting, Syria failed to commit additional forces to the conflict. The combined presence of the United States and Israel effectively deterred Syria from ever fully committing militarily. Speaking before a Congressional panel on September 22, President Nixon stated, "If the Syrians do, in fact, disengage, it will be because of the strong posture taken by the U.S."[18] The effectiveness of the Nixon Administration's policy was reaffirmed with the Syrian withdrawal from Jordan on September 23, 1970. By having publicly demonstrated a seeming willingness to intervene militarily, the United States was able to effectively assert its commitment to Jordan and thus deter a potentially serious military altercation in the Middle East.
        The Nixon Administration's implementation of an increasingly assertive posture towards the Middle East signaled a dramatic shift in the direction of American foreign policy. While the Jordanian Crisis was certainly the result of unresolved hostilities in the Middle East, its escalation to an international crisis was a product of American construction. The Nixon Administration utilized the hijacking of four commercial airliners in the fall of 1970 as an opportunity to weaken the anti-Western Fedayeen and to strengthen the United States' strategic position in the Middle East. Though the United States was hesitant to commit troops to Jordan due to its cumbersome military commitments in Southeast Asia, the Nixon Administration employed a composite of firm diplomatic posturing and the display of overt military signals to publicly demonstrate an uncompromised military capability in the Middle East. By publicly projecting a willingness to expand the conflict beyond Jordan, the United States was able to effectively communicate an unyielding commitment to the Middle East and, in effect, influence the outcome of events in the region. The Nixon Administration's effective handling of the crisis is a resounding demonstration of American brinkmanship during the Cold War.

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[16] Kissinger telecon with Rabin, Sep. 20, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 287.
[17] Minutes of the Substance of Discussion, Nixon to NSC Meeting, Sep. 22, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 313.
[18] Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion, Nixon to NSC Meeting, Sep. 23, 1970, in *FRUS 1969-76*, Doc. 318.