

Flexible Response: The Development of American Counterterrorism Policy, 1968 -1976

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Despite the purported end of the Global War on Terror, terrorism continues to be the dominant foreign policy issue in the United States. Indeed, it can be difficult to imagine an American foreign policy community freed from its focus on terrorism as an unparalleled threat that must be met with uncompromising force. Yet it was not long ago when the U.S. government held a far more flexible attitude toward terrorism. While attempting to develop its response to the outbreak of international terrorism in the late 1960s, the government proved willing to respond flexibly to terrorist organizations when it suited the country's interests. The Nixon administration's decision to develop a backchannel contact with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the mid 1970s eventually grew into a productive political and intelligence-sharing relationship, symbolizing the inherent flexibility of the government's policies.

Flexibility was possible in part because terrorism was emerging as an issue in the early 1970s. In the 1960s, the concept of terrorism as we know it today did not actually exist. Instead, the use of violence against civilians for political purposes was understood through a variety of diffuse lenses, ranging from hijacking and air piracy to an extension of guerilla warfare. That all changed in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab Israeli War, when the PLO's calculated use of attacks against civilian aircrafts received the attention of the international community and marked the emergence of a new concept of international terrorism.¹ Initially, the American government viewed this development as more of a harmless nuisance than a threat, and for several years the government's counterterrorism policies were characterized by confusion, inattention, a lack of capabilities, and ad-hoc decision-making. However, the shock of the terrorist attack at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games motivated the administration to develop a coherent counterterrorism policy. The administration responded by creating the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism (CCCT), which gave the impression that the government had succeeded in its goal. While the CCCT achieved moderate successes in developing a body of coherent counterterrorism policies and coordination between the different international and domestic government agencies, the organization remained weak. Meanwhile, the Nixon and Ford administrations viewed terrorism as a second class issue to which the U.S. could respond flexibly when it aligned with the country's broader foreign policy interests. Such a policy did not magically solve the problem of terrorism, but it allowed the government to manage the issue without the costs becoming disconnected from the benefits.² By choosing to respond flexibly to different terrorist organizations, the government could respond to threats as they developed while avoiding the trap of allowing terrorists to dictate international politics.

Understanding how these flexible policies proved successful in the context of their goals requires examining the origins of international terrorism as an issue on the American political scene. In the early 1960s, terrorism did not exist as a well-defined policy issue for the American public and policymakers.³ Some officials used terrorism interchangeably with terms such as guerrilla or insurgent to describe attacks against civilians during wartime.⁴ Meanwhile, newspapers described the hijacking of airplanes with terms such as "skyjacking" and "air piracy" in addition to "terrorism."⁵ The CIA used the term "terrorism" as early as 1948, but the term was used to describe the actions of certain groups, not the groups themselves. According to the CIA, terrorism encompassed various tactics such as assassinations, sabotages and bombings, but these tactics could be used by anyone from communists to rebel organizations to the CIA itself.⁶

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¹ In *The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism*, David C. Rapoport argues that modern terrorism can be organized into four periods: anarchist, anti-colonial, new left, and religious terrorism. The Palestinian movement originated in the anti-colonial period, but the emergence of international terrorism correlated with the development of new left movements. Later, the rise of Hamas began with the beginning of the religious wave of terrorism. For other sources on the American experience with and concept of terrorism before the 1960s, see *The Terrorist Trap* by Jeffrey D. Simon and Blindspot by Timothy Naftali.

² Engaging with the PLO encouraged the development of the rejectionist front, and terrorist attacks continued to increase worldwide throughout this time. See: Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, 1979: *International Terrorism in 1978*. Indiana University Government Publications Department: pg 1. However, the U.S. gained valuable insights into terrorist organizations due to its willingness to engage with the PLO. Additionally, the calculations of Kissinger and Nixon that avoiding a greater crisis in the Middle East sometimes necessitated engaging with extremist groups would seem to be correct.

³ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 26.

⁴ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 26.

⁵ See the terminology used in the following articles: *U.S. News and World Report*. 1970. "Stopping Skyjackers: Drive to Get a Better U.S. System." June, 31-32, and *U.S. News and World Report*. 1970. "Rising Terrorism in the Airlines." March, 10.

⁶ A search of the Declassified Documents Reference Center for CIA and terrorism from 1948 to 1968 returns several documents that highlight the different ways in which terrorism was used to describe the tactics used by a variety of different organizations and states. Also, see: Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 26

The incongruent nomenclature accurately reflected the issues facing the U.S. during the 1960s. The Johnson administration was frequently confronted by the hijackings of airplanes flying to airports in the American South, carried out by leftist radicals who would divert the planes to Cuba in the hopes of making a political statement. However, these annoying but insignificant attacks quickly developed a sense of the routine, with the U.S. and Cuban governments arriving at a *de facto* understanding involving the safe return of the passengers within hours of landing the hijacked plane in Cuba.⁷ Other attacks occurred amidst the Vietnam War, where the Viet Cong used terrorism as an extension of their guerrilla war in South Vietnam. While these comparatively minor terrorist attacks happened frequently, they were carried out by diverse groups with unique agendas posing little threat to people far from the epicenters of nationalist conflicts in regions such as South America and Southeast Asia. As a result, terrorism had not yet developed into an issue with a coherent identity and a perceived need for well crafted and coordinated policy responses from the government.

Terrorism's lack of identity as a policy issue began to change in 1968 with the emergence of a new phenomenon known as international terrorism.⁸ Even so, it took several years for the concept to develop a concrete definition in the discourse between policymakers, the press and the public. In 1967, the Arab armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Israeli military, losing the Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights in six days of brutal fighting. The defeat led to a shift in the strategy of the Palestinian nationalist movement, which until that point had found it acceptable to rely on the other Arab states to help them reclaim their lost homeland. Under the leadership of Yasser Arafat and his organization Fatah, the Palestinian resistance organizations engineered an internal takeover of the PLO that pushed out older leadership more loyal to the interests of Gamal Abdal Nasser, the president of Egypt who founded the organization to advance his claims to leadership in the Arab world.⁹

Once they had secured control of the PLO, the Fedayeen groups developed a strategy involving dramatic international terrorist attacks to draw attention and sympathy to the Palestinian cause. While these armed groups had been carrying out guerrilla attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets for many years, the new attacks targeted the international airways. The world was put on notice about this new development in the Palestinian nationalist movement when three members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked an El Al airplane in July of 1968 and diverted the plane from its route to Tel Aviv, holding the passengers hostage for more than a month before safely releasing them. In December of 1968, one passenger was killed when the PFLP attacked an El Al airplane in Athens. Increasing attacks throughout 1969 and 1970 shared several characteristics that slowly produced a new understanding of terrorism as a unique policy issue.¹⁰ These characteristics included the high profile nature of the attacks; their strong association with the Palestinian movement as opposed to the several diverse movements, states and non-state actors from earlier years; the clear strategy of using calculated violence against international targets to achieve political goals; and the statelessness of the Palestinian organizations carrying out the attacks.

In the summer and fall of 1968, Richard Nixon was campaigning on the Republican ticket to become the thirty-seventh President of the U.S. Despite the El Al attack in July, the issue of terrorism was far from Nixon's mind as the campaign ratcheted up against Hubert Humphrey, his Democratic opponent. The two candidates were primarily concerned with the Vietnam War and social issues, and once Nixon entered office he prioritized the issue of restoring U.S.-China relations and bringing about détente with the Soviet Union.¹¹ While the Middle East did appear on Nixon's agenda, it was only a secondary priority. Nixon handed the issue to Secretary of State Bill Rogers, explaining to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger that they would have enough on their plates with "Vietnam, SALT, the Soviets, Japan and Europe."¹² Nixon's primary goal in the region was to "halt the Soviet domination of the Arab Mideast," and he did so by ordering Secretary Rogers to move forward on the peace process by repairing relations with several of the Arab states that had cut diplomatic relations with the U.S. in the aftermath of the 1967 war.¹³

The CIA's reports in 1968 and 1969 reflected the Nixon administration's general lack of interest in terrorism in the Middle East. It would take four more years and countless terrorist attacks before the agency devoted weekly attention to terrorism as its own issue.¹⁴ The concept of international terrorism was still in its infancy, and CIA reports on Palestinian terrorist organizations in 1968 still used the term terrorism to refer to the groups' sabotage and infiltration tactics rather than recognizing their emerging strategy of international attacks.¹⁵ The agency took notice of Yasser Arafat and Fatah's

⁷ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 20

⁸ Jeffrey Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): pg 97.

⁹ Central Intelligence Agency. Directorate of Intelligence. Office of Political Research. 1976. *The Palestinian Arabs*. Michael Pearson. Declassified Documents Reference Center: pg 3.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): pg 98

¹¹ Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978): pgs 298, 321, 477.

¹² Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978): pg 477.

¹³ Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978): pg 477.

¹⁴ The first weekly report on terrorism was released after the Munich attacks, in 1972.

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency. 4 Oct. 1968. *Anti-Israeli Terrorist Organizations*. Declassified Documents Reference Center: pg 2.

violent actions against Israel, and the PLO quickly became an intelligence-gathering target after it was founded in 1964.¹⁶ However, according to James Critchfield, Chief of CIA Near East Division from 1960 to 1968, the agency did not initially consider Arafat much of a threat.¹⁷

As international terrorism picked up in the aftermath of the 1968 El Al attack, the issue gradually drew the attention of U.S. and international policymakers. The hijacking of TWA Flight 840 at the hands of the PFLP in 1969 played a particularly important role in alerting top officials within the Nixon administration to the changing nature of the issue. TWA 840 was the thirtieth American plane to be hijacked that year, but it represented a new threat as the first hijacking in U.S. history to be executed by a Palestinian group engaged in international terrorism, rather than a lone radical diverting a plane to Cuba.¹⁸ Without any procedures for dealing with the hijacking, the administration handed the issue to the State Department in the hopes that it could negotiate the release of the hostages. However, the Americans were at the mercy of the Syrian government to release the hostages, and despite repeated protests, Syria held onto two Israeli citizens for several weeks after the attacks.

In the aftermath of the TWA 840 attack, some American policymakers became interested in developing safety measures to deter terrorist attacks. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) implemented a basic screening process for boarding airplanes that included the limited use of metal detectors and new profiling techniques to spot potential hijackers. According to an article in *U.S. News and World Report*, the FAA believed that their procedures “averted many piracy attempts.” Though no hijackers had been caught by June 1970, the FAA claimed that a number of weapons had been discarded in airports, suggesting that the techniques deterred potential hijackings.¹⁹

While the White House played a limited role during the actual incident, the president did push for reforms. In the aftermath of the attack, Nixon addressed the United Nations General Assembly on the issue of hijacking, condemning the tactic and calling for the international community to develop solutions.²⁰ Yet despite the increased attention toward terrorism garnered by the TWA attack, the government’s response continued to be halfhearted at best. In fact, the FAA and the State Department argued that the problem of hijackings could not be solved in the short term. Instead, they viewed hijackings as “a flaw in the system that would just have to be managed.”²¹ International terrorism had finally hit American targets, but the government was unsure of how to respond - or if it even should.

Unlike the 1969 attack against TWA, the dramatic attacks of 1970 finally convinced the government that the U.S. had become a target of Palestinian radicals and would need to develop a response to the issue.²² In 1970, terrorists from the PFLP hijacked several planes and held more than three hundred passengers hostage in the Jordanian desert. While most of the hijackers were quickly released, the terrorists held onto fifty-six people, including thirty-eight Americans.²³

Once again, the Nixon administration found itself facing an explosive hostage situation without clear procedures to respond. The U.S. lacked coordinated strategies for dealing with international terrorist incidents involving Americans, and there was no military capability for performing hostage rescue missions. The situation was complicated by Jordan’s civil war, with King Hussein fighting against the Palestinian Fedayeen who had amassed enough power to threaten the survival of the Jordanian monarchy. In the initial hours of the incident, Nixon met with his cabinet to determine the nature of the government’s ad hoc response. The administration decided to pursue negotiations with the hijackers, eschewing any attempt at a military rescue due to the lack of resources and the fear that any intervention would further undermine King Hussein’s tenuous grip on the state.²⁴ After protracted negotiations, the administration’s actions resulted in the release of hostages without incident.

The government’s response to the PFLP’s attack marked the first high profile case in which government policy on terrorism was subordinated to greater regional and international interests. With King Hussein threatened by the Palestinian armed groups, the Nixon administration prioritized the King’s needs over those of the hostages in an effort to preserve both a friendly ally and stability in the Middle East.²⁵ The President’s narrative of the events reveals his priorities. In his memoir, Nixon mentioned the hostage situation only briefly, choosing instead to focus on the international crisis and Cold War politics surrounding the Jordanian civil war.²⁶ In describing the stakes, Nixon wrote that:

¹⁶ Jack O’Connell, *King’s Counsel: A Memoir of War, Espionage, and Diplomacy in the Middle East*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010): pg 33

¹⁷ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 30

¹⁸ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 36.

¹⁹ *U.S. News and World Report*. 1970. “Stopping Skyjackers: Drive to Get a Better U.S. System.” June: pg 31-32.

²⁰ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 39.

²¹ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 38-39.

²² Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 41.

²³ Jeffrey Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): pg 97-98.

²⁴ Jeffrey Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): pg 101-102.

²⁵ Jeffrey Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): pg 104.

²⁶ Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978): pg 483.

If [the insurrection] succeeded, the entire Middle East might erupt in war: the Israelis would almost certainly take pre-emptive measures against a Syrian-dominated radical government in Jordan; the Egyptians were tied to Syria by military alliances; and Soviet prestige was on the line with both the Syrians and the Egyptians. Since the United States could not stand idly by and watch Israel being driven into the sea, the possibility of a direct U.S.-Soviet confrontation was uncomfortably high. It was like a ghastly game of dominoes with a nuclear war waiting at the end.²⁷

Nixon's decision to elevate international politics over the welfare of the hostages shaped his response to the PFLP. He precluded the use of military force to free the hostages, even at substantial risk to their lives, because he feared that any American intervention would provide further motivation for the forces arrayed against King Hussein while also raising the chances of a Syrian intervention.²⁸ Instead, the President and Kissinger worked with the Israelis and the Soviets to restrain Syria through negotiations, while the State Department was left to deal with negotiating the release of the hostages.²⁹ Ultimately, Nixon's flexibility in marking his priorities and designing his response to the crisis led the government's ad hoc response toward success. King Hussein stayed in power, the Syrian intervention was halted, and all of the hostages were safely released.

However, despite the President's successes in dealing with the incident, some in the press vilified him for his "aloof" reaction to the crisis and the seemingly unorganized nature of the U.S. response.³⁰ While this criticism missed the strategic calculation behind Nixon's reserved stance and the advantages of being able to develop flexible policies tailored to specific circumstances, the events of 1970 convinced Nixon that American counterterrorism policies needed to be improved. As a result, he pushed for serious adjustments in how the U.S. government dealt with terrorism. The creation of a corps of Air Marshals resulted directly from the event, as President Nixon ignored the objections of his Secretary of Defense and personally intervened to order the training of several thousand marshals for rapid deployment on American planes. The President also threatened to apply unilateral sanctions against any state that aided or sheltered terrorists.³¹ At the same time, Nixon pushed for international agreements that made it more difficult for terrorists to operate. These agreements included the 1970 Hague Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft and the 1971 Montreal Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation, which made it a criminal offense to perform a hijacking or act of violence on an aircraft and required signatories to extradite or severely punish perpetrators.³²

However, though the events of 1970 succeeded in forcing the administration to pay attention international terrorism, its consequences were not fully understood and policy on the issue continued to lack focus.³³ That finally changed with the terrorist attack at the 1972 Munich Olympics. On the night of September 4, 1972, eight members of the terrorist organization Black September slipped into the Olympic Village in Munich, Germany and took eleven Israeli athletes hostage. Two of the eleven athletes were killed trying to fight back in the initial chaos of the attack, and the other nine, along with all five terrorists, later died after a botched rescue attempt by the German police. The entire attack played out on television, bringing the terror into living rooms across the world.³⁴

Despite the fact that no Americans were involved in the attack, the incident had an immediate impact on the U.S. government due to the international nature of the event and the high profile coverage in the domestic media. As a result, the international terrorist threat that had been growing since 1968 was finally clear; and from this point forward the U.S. government's response to terrorism became increasingly organized around a growing government bureaucracy devoted to fighting international terrorism. This new policy opposed the ad hoc decision making from before. The government followed the situation in Munich closely, and in the aftermath of the massacre both the State Department and the CIA developed initiatives for dealing explicitly with terrorism.³⁵ The State Department created several committees; a committee charged with protecting U.S. citizens from international terrorist attacks; a committee to lead the U.S. response to terrorist organizations and attacks; and an interagency group dedicated to coordinating counterterrorism policy. The CIA ordered its case officers to collect intelligence on terrorist organizations and a group of analysts in the Directorate of Intelligence were tasked with writing weekly reports on international terrorism.³⁶ Their first report came together by September 15, less than two weeks after the massacre. By November 8, the group of analysts released a Special Report on Black Sep-

²⁷ Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978): pg 483.

²⁸ Jeffrey Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): pg 101.

²⁹ Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978): pgs 484-5.

³⁰ Jeffrey Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): pg 104.

³¹ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 44.

³² Jeffrey Simon, *The Terrorist Trap*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): pg 104.

³³ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 52.

³⁴ David Tucker, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1997): pg 6.

³⁵ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 55.

³⁶ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 55.

tember, the organization that had carried out the Munich massacre. The report examined Black September's development, key figures, and its links to Yasser Arafat, the PLO and other Palestinian armed groups. The report concluded with a sober warning, stating that "the Palestinian Arabs are increasingly isolated and unhappy with the "no-war-no-peace" situation... Rome and Bonn are already threatened by mounting terrorist activity; tomorrow it may be the turn of London and other Western capitals."³⁷ These actions by the State Department and the CIA marked the first time that the concept of international terrorism entered the government's policy agenda.

The Munich Massacre ignited the Nixon administration's efforts to coordinate counterterrorism efforts from the highest levels of the U.S. government. With the President increasingly concerned about the domestic political fallout from the event and the potential for terrorist attacks against American and Israeli political leaders, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger proposed the creation of a cabinet level committee focused exclusively on counterterrorism. Following Kissinger's recommendation, Nixon announced the establishment of the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism (CCCT) on September 27, 1972.³⁸

In his statement establishing the CCCT, Nixon stated that the group's purpose was to "consider the most effective means by which to prevent terrorism here and abroad and...take the lead in establishing procedures to ensure that our government can take appropriate action in response to acts of terrorism swiftly and effectively."³⁹ The CCCT included all of America's defense and foreign policy heavyweights, including the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Director of Central Intelligence, and several other department heads.⁴⁰ During its five years of existence as an organization between 1972 and 1977, the CCCT only met once. Yet despite the fact that the organization served primarily as window dressing, the direct involvement of these key players with the issue of international terrorism marked a watershed in U.S. counterterrorism policy, as it signaled that the government now recognized the unique nature of the issue.

The CCCT's most important function was to create a working group of midlevel bureaucrats to carry out the committee's mission. This working group met on a consistent biweekly schedule for several years monitoring terrorism around the world and developing interagency protocols for implementing security measures and responding to terrorist attacks.⁴¹ The group included representatives from every government agency involved with terrorism; from the Department of State, the CIA and the NSA to the FBI and the Department of Transportation. Items on the group's agenda varied from how to protect the Alaskan pipeline from terrorist attacks and outlining government policy during hostage taking episodes to trying terrorism suspects and monitoring developments in the Palestinian terrorist movement.⁴²

The chair of the committee's working group was a Foreign Service officer by the name of Robert A. Fearey. His position as Chairman highlighted the State Department's status as the government agency most involved on the issue of terrorism. Attendance records from the dozens of working group meetings show that State Department representatives always outnumbered representatives from other agencies, often with as many as six Foreign Service officers attending each meeting.⁴³ The dominance of the State Department on this issue revealed that the Nixon administration viewed terrorism as a political rather than military or even criminal issue, especially overseas. While the FBI and the Department of Transportation worked to implement counterterrorism safeguards at home, the State Department clearly took the lead abroad. In government protocols designed by the CCCT for dealing with international terrorist attacks, the first step was always to notify the State Department's Operations center.⁴⁴ Throughout this time period, the Nixon administration refrained from assigning the CIA to conduct covert warfare against Palestinian organizations such as the PFLP.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, a military option from the Department of Defense simply did not exist.⁴⁶

The CIA had a sizeable representation of two to three officers at each CCCT meeting, and the agency's reports from abroad played a central role in shaping how the working group, and thus the government at large, understood terrorism. Throughout the 1970s the weekly reports on international terrorism from the Directorate of Intelligence remained the primary vehicle for monitoring and analyzing terrorist threats against U.S. interests abroad. The reports drew on all source materials from overseas agencies, including reports from both CIA and State Department officers that provided an over-

³⁷ Central Intelligence Agency. 8 Nov. 1972. *Special Report on Black September*. Declassified Documents Reference Center.

³⁸ U.S. Department of State. Oct. 1972. *President Nixon Establishes Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism*. Department of State Weekly Bulletin: 475.

³⁹ U.S. Department of State. Oct. 1972. *President Nixon Establishes Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism*. Department of State Weekly Bulletin: 475.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State. Oct. 1972. *President Nixon Establishes Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism*. Department of State Weekly Bulletin: 475.

⁴¹ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 60.

⁴²"Agendas." Box 16, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁴³"Agendas." Box 16, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁴⁴"Revised Procedures for Responding to Acts of Terrorism." Box 17, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁴⁵ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 52.

⁴⁶ Delta Force would not be created for several years, until the late 1970s.

view of attacks that occurred during the week of the report, notes on further developments in past high profile attacks, and analysis of potential terrorist threats and their targets.⁴⁷ Maintaining an international focus, the reports revealed that Palestinian and Latin American perpetrators were clearly the most active groups at the time. In addition to the weekly reports, the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence also wrote in-depth analyses on topics ranging from the Palestinians to international terrorism.

The growing American counterterrorism bureaucracy achieved several successes in the early 1970s, particularly in its ability to provide the government with protocols for responding to terrorist attacks and analysis of terrorist organizations and the threats they posed. However, the bureaucracy continued to lack a strong grasp on the policymaking process related to terrorism, allowing the president significant flexibility in his response to terrorist organizations. The development of a relationship between the CIA and the PLO as Nixon tried to end the Arab-Israeli conflict in the early 1970s revealed the extent of the president's flexibility and its ability to impact the national interest.

The Nixon administration tried to propagate the Arab-Israeli peace process in 1970 to no avail. Due to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, concerns about Soviet influence in the Middle East as a motivator of international terrorism, Kissinger decided to elevate the administration's role in pushing for Arab-Israeli peace.⁴⁸ A major obstacle standing in the way of an agreement was the governance of the Palestinian population. The PLO seemed to be the logical option. Driven out of Jordan and residing in Lebanon, Yasser Arafat wanted the PLO to be recognized as the legitimate national government of the Palestinian people. The possibility of working with Arafat was introduced at a meeting of the CCCT when some policymakers in the U.S. recognized an opportunity to significantly undermine international terrorism by meeting his demands in return for his promise to halt terrorist attacks.⁴⁹ At the time it was believed that such an approach would require a major change in U.S. policy, as the Nixon administration had publicly promised Israel that it would not deal with the PLO, and the U.S. government fought against the recognition of the PLO in the UN.⁵⁰ However, unbeknownst to members of the committee, the Nixon administration had already been holding secret discussions with the PLO for more than a year.

On March 1, 1973, three diplomats from the U.S. Embassy of Khartoum were taken hostage by Palestinian gunmen from Black September. The State Department led the response by planning to negotiate for the hostages' release. However, after the gunmen demanded that prominent terrorists be freed, President Nixon rejected the idea in an unscripted press conference, stating that the U.S. would not be subject to blackmail.⁵¹ In response, Arafat himself ordered the execution of the three hostages, and they were unceremoniously shot in the basement of the embassy that day. In addition to sparking the murder of the hostages, Nixon's statement had unintended long-term consequences. The President's words would form the foundation of the infamous U.S. policy of "no concessions" to any demands from terrorist organizations.⁵²

However, despite the fact that "no concessions" would later become an immutable principle of American counterterrorism policy, Nixon was already busy breaking his own rule within several months of the attack in Khartoum. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, several Arab states that had cut relations with the U.S. in 1968 were suddenly interested in talking to the Americans again. Those regimes also pushed the U.S. to accept Yasser Arafat as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians, and when Arafat himself expressed interest in meeting with the Americans, President Nixon decided to overlook the massacre of the American diplomats to initiate secret meetings with the PLO.⁵³ The meetings aimed to encourage Arab states such as Syria to agree to peace talks with Israel, and they reflected Nixon's continuing ability to ignore the effects of terrorism if he could advance a major American foreign policy goal.⁵⁴

The initial contacts took place late in 1973. Nixon sent General Vernon Walters, Deputy Director of the CIA, to Morocco to meet with Arafat's representative of the PLO. Nixon and Kissinger chose him because the meeting could be passed off as an intelligence contact that allowed the President to avoid the backlash he feared from Jewish Americans that would result from negotiations with the PLO.⁵⁵ After a successful first meeting, Kissinger and Arafat began to correspond secretly through anonymous notes to decipher each other's intentions.⁵⁶ The meeting also produced a long lasting relationship between the CIA and the PLO. Walters met with Ali Hasan Salameh, a close confidant of Arafat, leader of the PLO's

⁴⁷"Weekly Situation Reports on International Terrorism." Box 17, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁴⁸ Robert Kumamoto, *International Terrorism and American Foreign Relations, 1945-1976*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999): pgs 171-172.

⁴⁹ April 5, 1975 Meeting of the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism Working Group, "Minutes." Box 17, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library. Image 8159.

⁵⁰ Robert Kumamoto, *International Terrorism and American Foreign Relations, 1945-1976*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999): pg 183.

⁵¹ *The New York Times*, "Transcript of President Nixon's Press Conference," March 3, 1973. LexisNexis.

⁵² Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pgs 70-71.

⁵³ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 74.

⁵⁴ Robert Kumamoto, *International Terrorism and American Foreign Relations, 1945-1976*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999): pg 173.

⁵⁵ Timothy Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2007): pg 755.

⁵⁶ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 74.

intelligence unit, and active member of Black September. In the aftermath of his contact with Walters in 1972, Salameh started to meet regularly with CIA officer Bob Ames. Fluent in Arabic, Ames played a crucial role in the Directorate of Operations' actions in the Middle East, where he was recognized as one of the U.S.' premier experts on Arab affairs.

Ames and Salameh first met in 1968, when both men tried to recruit each other as sources for their intelligence agencies.⁵⁷ In 1973, with explicit authorization from the highest levels of their governments, the two men began an intelligence friendship that produced important benefits for both the U.S. government and the PLO. The relationship lasted until Salameh's death in 1979 at the hands of Mossad. Between the two men, the U.S. and the PLO negotiated a ceasefire, agreeing to supply each other with intelligence on mutual enemies while refraining from attacking each other.⁵⁸ The PLO also assisted the U.S. in Lebanon when the Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975, protecting U.S. diplomats and passing along important information.⁵⁹

The relationship between Salameh and Ames provides the central example of how a flexible government policy toward terrorism benefited the U.S. government. The information gleaned from their contacts gave the CIA crucial insights on the nature of terrorism in the Arab world.⁶⁰ More importantly, the U.S. used the relationship to further its goals in the peace process. In the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Arafat signaled his desire to be recognized as the representative of the Palestinian people. Through its backchannel relationship, the U.S. informed Arafat that he could only be recognized if he renounced terrorism, encouraging the Palestinian leader to move toward that position.⁶¹ The U.S. had to ignore several unsavory facts in Arafat's past, and the threat of renewed terrorism was always possible if he did not get his way.⁶² Yet, by cooperating with the PLO, the U.S. managed to move the organization toward a position in which negotiations became possible.

On August 9, 1974, Richard Nixon's resignation from the presidency immediately catapulted his vice president, Gerald Ford, into office. Initially, President Ford retained many Nixon insiders to maintain the policies of the previous administration. By this point the young counterterrorism bureaucracy had started to mature. The CCCT had met nearly two hundred times and the U.S. government had developed an extensive body of policies related to terrorism, including detailed protocols for responding to major international attacks, how to deal with specific incidents ranging from hijackings to hostage taking, and detailed studies on different classifications of terrorism.⁶³ President Ford continued these policies, maintaining the same governmental structures and the emphasis on terrorism as a political issue that could be subordinated to greater interests in the international system. However, whereas Nixon saw terrorism as a major international security threat, President Ford largely ignored the issue. The midlevel bureaucrats who reported weekly on terrorism and staffed government bodies such as the CCCT working group did not share that lack of attention. These officials were becoming increasingly concerned with two perceived trends in international terrorism: the possibility of nuclear terrorism and the upsurge in Palestinian terrorism resulting from the development of the so called "rejectionist front."⁶⁴

In the aftermath of Arafat's decision to seek recognition for the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, several factions broke off from the organization in protest of the possibility for negotiations with and recognition of Israel. These organizations were part of the developing transnational terrorism movement noted by CIA analyst David Milbank, and they included such figures as Abu Nidal and Carlos the Jackal.⁶⁵ In response to this development, the CIA refused to paint all Palestinians with the same brush. In a report on the Palestinian Arabs, analysts noted that several of the Fedayeen groups, while continuing to use violence against Israel, were no longer a major terrorist threat and should be considered primarily for their political significance.⁶⁶ However, the rejectionist front posed a new threat to U.S. interests overseas. The working group concluded that these groups were part of a shift toward intermediate level terrorism, "a level of terrorist violence lying between mass destruction terrorism and the types of assassinations or abductions of medium-grade U.S.G. officials or private citizens with which U.S. terrorism policy had been primarily concerned."⁶⁷ The working group made several recommendations for dealing with this new threat, including increased security around targets such as

⁵⁷ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 76.

⁵⁸ Timothy Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2007): pg 755.

⁵⁹ Robert Kumamoto, *International Terrorism and American Foreign Relations, 1945-1976*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999): pgs 188-190.

⁶⁰ Timothy Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2007): pg 755.

⁶¹ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 75.

⁶² Central Intelligence Agency. 17 Dec. 1974. *Weekly Situation Report on International Terrorism*. Declassified Documents Reference Center.

⁶³ "Agendas." Box 16, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library; "Revised Procedures for Responding to Acts of Terrorism." Box 17, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library. Also, see "Dealing with Political Kidnapping." Box 16, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁶⁴ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 83

⁶⁵ Central Intelligence Agency. Directorate of Intelligence. Office of Political Research. 1976. *International Terrorism: Diagnosis and Prognosis*. David L. Milbank. Indiana University Government Publications Department.

⁶⁶ Central Intelligence Agency. Directorate of Intelligence. Office of Political Research. 1976. *The Palestinian Arabs*. Michael Pearson. Declassified Documents Reference Center.

⁶⁷ "Intermediate Level Terrorism Study." Box 17, Counsel to the President Bobbie Greene Kilberg 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Library.

commercial airlines and further interagency cooperation.

Assistance to the U.S. government against this new threat came from the CIA's growing relationship with Salameh and the PLO. The PLO shared information on the new rejectionist groups with the CIA, helping them to avoid attacks. The relationship did not solve all of the country's problems with terrorism, but U.S. security benefited from the relationship.⁶⁸ In addition to providing assistance against the rejectionist front during the Lebanese civil war, the PLO arrested the assassins of a U.S. diplomat and assisted the U.S. government with the evacuation of its officials from the country.⁶⁹

Between 1968 and 1972, the U.S. government struggled to come to terms with the emerging threat of international terrorism associated with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, the American policy response was often defined by confusion about the nature of the threat, a lack of attention on the issue, and ad hoc decision-making. The shocking terrorist attacks at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972 finally clarified the existence of international terrorism in the minds of policymakers that sparked the first attempts by the U.S. government to develop bureaucratic procedures for dealing with terrorism as a unique policy issue. Over the next four years, the CCCT coordinated counterterrorism policies between different government agencies and developed extensive protocols for responding to terrorist attacks. Meanwhile, units in the CIA and the State Department produced regular reports on international terrorism. In addition to the maturation of the bureaucracy, counterterrorism policy between 1968 and 1976 was also defined by the willingness of Presidents Nixon and Ford to respond flexibly to terrorist organizations if they aligned with the interests of the U.S. President Nixon tailored his response to the PFLP hijackings of 1970 to prioritize stability in Jordan over the release of the hostages. In 1973, he secretly authorized U.S. officials to meet with the PLO in the hope that these meetings would help to advance the peace process in the Middle East. From those meetings, the U.S. developed a strong relationship with the PLO, gaining important intelligence, a moderating influence over Yasser Arafat, and PLO protection during the Lebanese civil war. These substantial benefits highlight the advantages of maintaining a flexible response toward different terrorist organizations throughout the Nixon and Ford administrations. Due to the government's willingness to work with organizations that had perpetrated terrorist attacks against Americans in the past, the U.S. advanced its greater strategic aims in the international system.

⁶⁸ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2005): pg 86.

⁶⁹ Robert Kumamoto, *International Terrorism and American Foreign Relations, 1945-1976*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999): pgs 188-190.