

SUBNATIONAL CONFLICT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

by

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Almost since the beginning of Western civilization, the Mediterranean Sea has been a theater of conflict, a boulevard for battleships and invading armies, a moat between great empires, diverse cultures, religions, and political systems. What the nations of the Mediterranean have in common, besides a shoreline, is 25 centuries of warfare, warfare between the Romans and the Carthaginians, between Moslems and Christians, between the corsairs of the Barbary Coast and the merchant fleets of European kingdoms, between the weaker non-European countries and the colonial powers, between radical revolutionary regimes in North Africa and the Middle East and the industrial nations of Western Europe.

The Mediterranean continues to be an arena of international and internal conflict. This meeting on interdependence and security in the Mediterranean takes place as Syrian and Israeli troops still occupy Lebanon, and only a week after French Legionnaires, Italian Bersaglieri, and American Marines covered the withdrawal and dispersal of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Beirut.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been 37 wars and other armed conflicts involving the countries of the Mediterranean, 23 of them since World War II. In the 10 conflicts which have occurred during the last ten years, 10 of the 17 nations that border the Mediterranean were directly engaged, and three more were indirectly engaged.

Many of the conflicts in the region are internal and many of the conflicts between nations also involve subnational or nongovernmental forces. (This does not count the current terrorist campaigns in several Western European nations.) This fragmentation of warfare toward more numerous limited conflicts involving both national and subnational forces is part of a worldwide trend.

The disputes and conflicts among and within the nations around the Mediterranean Sea have manifested themselves in a high level of terrorist activity. Thirty-six percent of all recorded incidents of international terrorism since 1968 have occurred in the 17 Mediterranean countries. No other geographic region in the world has experienced such a high level of terrorist activity. Terrorist activity is not distributed evenly among the 17 nations. Some of the countries, like Albania, Algeria, Libya, Malta, Morocco, and Tunisia, have suffered very little or no international terrorism within their borders. (Yugoslavia, while relatively free of terrorist activity at home, has been a frequent target of Croatian terrorist activity abroad.) But seven countries--France, Greece, Italy, Israel, Lebanon, Spain, and Turkey--account for 94 percent of the activity within the region and 34 percent of the total volume of international terrorist activity worldwide.

The Mediterranean is the cradle of international terrorism in its contemporary form. The FLN in Algeria provided a model for the new generation of groups, employing terrorist tactics that emerged in the late 1960s and the 1970s. In pursuit of independence, the Algerian nationalists carried their deadly struggle to the French metropole, a strategy that later would be emulated by the Palestinians.

Frustrated by the failure of Arab military power in the Six Day War of 1967 and by a world that ignored their plight, a new generation of Palestinian groups launched an international campaign of terrorism designed to bring them worldwide attention. The Palestinians did not confine their operations to Israel and the Occupied Territories but carried their terrorist campaign abroad, primarily to Western Europe, where they struck Israeli, Jewish, European as well as Arab targets. In an effort to increase their capabilities and broaden their struggle, the Palestinians developed contacts with other subnational groups in Europe and the Middle East, such as Germany's Red Army Faction, Direct Action in France, and the Turkish People's Liberation Army, and provided them with various forms of support.

Out of the Palestinian training camps and the civil war in Lebanon new groups emerged like the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, closely associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Black June, a splinter of Fatah. Both groups have operated worldwide.

Nations of the region thus face terrorism on two fronts: terrorism by indigenous groups using terrorist tactics in an effort to obtain independence, overthrow ~~of~~ the government, or force it to adopt authoritarian measures, and; foreign or ethnic-based groups carrying out terrorist operations on behalf of foreign causes against foreign as well as indigenous targets. The two often overlap. In the former case, the problem is primarily local. In the latter case, terrorist activity cannot be isolated from other modes of armed conflict among nations or within other nations, but can be seen as another dimension of warfare.

Thus, it is not simply that the countries of the Mediterranean individually suffer high levels of terrorist activity. Much of the terrorist activity of the region is inextricably intertwined with international conflicts.

With technological advance and economic progress, has come an increase in the movement across borders of persons, news, ideas, money, goods--and conflict. The people come as tourists, students, technicians, workers, exiles, and refugees. Modern communications, in particular the mass media, enable them to keep informed about the quarrels of their homeland. A quarrel in one part of the world increasingly produces violent echos elsewhere. Conflict in one country often also has effects in other countries. It may imperil investments, cut off sources of vital material, eliminate markets, and put the lives of diplomats or citizens living in another country at risk. One aspect of interdependence is the increased internationalization of conflict.

Governments have increasingly supported or exploited guerrilla and terrorist groups as a means of waging surrogate warfare against their foes. It may be considered impolite to mention these episodes at an international meeting, but all cited here have been widely reported, are hardly denied, and illustrate a worldwide trend toward exploitation of terrorism by governments. Algeria has provided support in the form of training for Spain's Basque terrorists and France's Corsican separatists, and also supports Polisario guerrillas in their fight with Morocco. Libya has provided money, training facilities, and asylum to Basque, French, Italian, and Palestinian terrorists. Libya also backed a plot against King Hassan of Morocco in 1971, a plot against President Sadat of Egypt in 1974, and sponsored a guerrilla raid into Tunisia in

1980. Syria supports Al Assifa, a splinter group of Fatah which has carried out terrorist operations in Lebanon and Western Europe. Spanish, Italian, French, Turkish, and Armenian terrorists have received training at PLO camps in Lebanon. Israel has provided support to various armed militias in Lebanon. Israel also may have approached the Red Brigades with an offer of assistance. It is not clear what the Israelis were after. Perhaps they simply were attempting to garner information about the Palestinians who, it is known, had provided the Red Brigades and other terrorist groups in Europe with weapons and explosives with an understanding that a portion of these would be set aside for future Palestinian operations.

While not actively cooperating with terrorists, governments have arranged quiet deals with terrorists in return for immunity from further attack. Held hostage by the Red Brigades, Aldo Moro revealed that Palestinian terrorists apprehended in Rome were released as part of a deal with the Black September Organization. According to subsequent revelations in the press, this kind of thing has occurred on several occasions. It has been alleged that several Western European governments had tacit deals of this sort--prompt release of Palestinian terrorists apprehended in return for immunity from further terrorist attacks. Both Spanish and Italian officials have complained at times about the unwillingness of French authorities to move vigorously against Basque and Italian terrorists resting up in France.

A number of states have also directly adopted terrorist tactics themselves, sending teams of assassins to silence foreign foes or domestic opponents living abroad. In response to terrorist attacks on Israeli targets abroad, Israeli agents assassinated a number of

Palestinians in Europe believed involved in terrorist activities. Syria is believed to have commissioned the gunmen who assassinated that country's former premier in Paris. Libya openly avowed its campaign directed against Libyan "traitors living abroad" and was accused of sending teams to kill American diplomats in Europe. The Spanish have been accused of operating a parallel police force in France dedicated to killing leaders of the Basque separatist movement. Yugoslavia has been accused of killing emigre Croatian exiles. Outraged by continuing Armenian terrorist attacks against Turkish diplomats, Turkish officials have recently warned that there would be no sanctuary for the Armenian gunmen, implying direct extraterritorial action.

Governments have dealt with terrorists in the last quarter of the twentieth century much as the European powers dealt with the pirates that plagued the Mediterranean in the early seventeenth century. They have simultaneously tolerated, combatted, fomented, supplied, and exploited them.

The European navies could have crushed the pirates if they had been willing to cooperate and cared to make the investment, but the pirates only molested trade, they did not interrupt it. Navies were saved for larger contests. Moreover, the pirates were trading partners. At least until the early eighteenth century, the corsairs of the Barbary Coast bought most of their guns and a large portion of their gunpowder from European merchants, and Europeans bought a number of commodities from the North African states--a profitable trade for some. European renegades trained pirate gunners. And at times, European kings sought alliances with the corsairs to prey upon the shipping or distract the navy of a rival European power.

So it would be equally incorrect today to view the posture of governments, the governments of the Mediterranean countries, or even the governments of those countries that have suffered the most from terrorism as one of unmitigated hostility toward their adversaries. Instead, just beneath the rhetoric, one enters a labyrinth of terrorists and government agents, of secret wars and secret deals, of direct action and deliberate inaction.

Will the subnational groups active in the Mediterranean carry out operations at sea? To a limited extent, they already do. Guns for guerrillas and terrorists move by sea from Western Europe to North Africa and the Middle East, or sometimes from the Middle East and North Africa back to Western Europe. This clandestine trade in guns is only part of a larger traffic of contraband goods including narcotics, cigarettes, and other controlled goods that moves back and forth across the Mediterranean. This trade is carried out by a vast flotilla of fast, light boats able to avoid the detection of customs authorities.

A number of the groups within the PLO have also launched small fleets of powerboats to infiltrate guns and fighters into Israel. The PLO's maritime force includes as many as 500 to 600 small mother-ships from which infiltrators may launch rubber dinghies. It is also reported that members of the PFLP have received underwater demolitions training in the Soviet Union.

Although subnational groups have not operated extensively in the maritime environment, they have carried out a variety of actions: attacks on port facilities, sabotage or seizure of freighters and tankers, seizures or sinkings of ocean liners. Some examples worldwide:

January 1961: Seventy men armed with machine guns and hand grenades seized control of a Portuguese liner with 600 passengers on board. Opponents of the Portuguese government, they demanded political recognition of "this" liberated part of the national territory. Negotiations ended the episode 11 days later.

May 1968: P^FLP terrorists carried out an assault on the Liberian-registered oil tanker "Coral Sea." Terrorists on a speedboat fired 10 bazooka shells at the tanker, causing some damage but no casualties. The attack occurred in the Strait of Bab el mandeb at the entrance to the Red Sea. It was intended to deter tankers from using the Israeli port of Eilat on the Red Sea.

August 1972: Black September Organization set fire to an oil storage facility at the port of Trieste because it supplied oil to West Germany and Austria, both of which, the BSO said, supported Israel. The fire caused \$7 million in damage.

December 1972: A plan by Black September Organization terrorists to hijack an Italian passenger ship between Cyprus and Israel was frustrated by police.

March 1973: A Greek charter ship carrying 250 tourists bound for Haifa sank in Beirut harbor following an explosion. There were no casualties. Black September claimed credit for the incident.

February 1974: Three gunmen seized control of a Greek freighter in the port of Karachi. They threatened to blow up the ship and kill their hostages unless the Greek government freed two imprisoned Arabs terrorists. Greece agreed to commute the sentences of the two and the ship hijackers were flown to Libya.

May 1975: Oil tankers in the Persian Gulf were alerted to reports of a plot by Arab skindivers to hijack a ship. ~~the General Council of British Shipping said.~~

August 1976: A Greek vessel in Lebanon was sunk by three limpet mines. The attackers were believed to be members of a right wing Lebanese Christian group. The vessel was partly loaded with cargo believed to be arms destined for the Al Fatah organization.

November 1977: The Algerian-backed Polisario Front guerrillas attacked a Spanish trawler with mortar and machine-gun fire, and seized three Spanish fishermen. The guerrillas used a rocket-armed inflatable speedboat in the attack. The guerrillas claimed they had seized the trawler because it had "violated the waters of the Sahara republic to pillage its

maritime riches." The guerrillas announced on November 25 that they would release the three Spanish fishermen. On December 23, eight French hostages who had been held captive by the Polisario Front were handed over to U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim by a minister of the Polisario Front at the U.N. office in Algiers.

September 1978: The sinking by the Israeli Navy of an explosive-laden freighter foiled a sensational Al Fatah terrorist plot. The terrorists planned to sail the vessel into the Sinai port of Eilat, firing 42 122-mm rockets at the port's tank farm and then ramming the 600-ton boat, crammed with more than three tons of explosives, onto the crowded beach.

July 1980: Police arrested three Corsican separatists of the Front for the National Liberation of Corsica (FNLC) who were planning to blow up oil tankers at Fos, the Marseilles Oil Terminal, and nearby oil refineries. Police officials said that 44 pounds of explosives had been found attached to a pipeline at the Berre refinery near Marseilles.

October 1980: A Libyan ship in for repairs at the port of Genoa almost sank following the explosion of a device that had been attached to the hull below the waterline. The Maltese National Front was suspected of the attack.

These events provide an idea of the range of targets: passenger liners, freighters, tankers, a trawler, port facilities (primarily those associated with the transfer or refining of oil). Except for their size and inherent strength, these things are virtually unprotected. The events that have occurred also provide an idea of the adversaries' techniques and weapons: limpet mines attached by scuba divers, rockets fired from small speed boats, an explosives-filled freighter armed with 122mm rockets. Small submersible craft, which are commercially available, ^{but} more powerful light weapons systems are probably within the range of criminals and terrorists. While the "navies" of smugglers and terrorists are no match in an open contest with the navies of most Mediterranean countries, they could create havoc with shipping and port facilities in the region.

We have seen few examples of sustained guerrilla war at sea. The American-backed secret war against Cuba in the 1960s comes to mind. In that case, anti-Castro Cuban exiles were trained in navigation techniques, and were provided with small, fast boats, recoilless rifles, machine guns, and mines. For several years they carried on a naval guerrilla war, sinking ships off the coast of Cuba, raiding Cuban ports. The military effect of this campaign was probably negligible, but a similar campaign in the Mediterranean Sea where commercial traffic is heavier, the risks of ecological damage greater, and the political situation more complicated, could cause some problems.

While subnational conflict in the region is not a maritime problem but a political one, many of the events described, had they occurred in the Mediterranean Sea, would have had major international consequences. Certainly the hijacking or sinking of an ocean liner filled with passengers, or the hijacking of a loaded oil tanker at sea or in ^{port} harbor could pose a complex problem involving the governments and possibly the naval forces of several Mediterranean nations.

Looking to the future, naval forces may have to review their capabilities for protecting vital port facilities and shipping from seaborne terrorists, and rescuing hostages held aboard hijacked vessels. Governments may have to examine how they would cooperate in a major incident at sea involving the interests of several nations.

What are the prospects for cooperation? If terrorists were something in the water, the Mediterranean nations might cooperate to combat them as they have agreed to act collectively in cleaning up pollution. But as terrorism is an effluent of the region's many and

diverse conflicts, a collective response in this domain seems unlikely. There is at present no Mediterranean political forum. This has not prevented some cooperation among some governments, in some areas, but overall that cooperation has been quite limited.

According to information provided by the United States Department of State, all but three of the 17 Mediterranean nations (Albania, Algeria, and Malta) have signed and ratified the three international conventions on airline hijacking (the Tokyo Convention of 1963, the Hague Convention of 1970, and the Montreal Convention of 1971). These conventions certainly have not prevented airline hijackings, but they facilitate cooperation when one does occur. Generally, it has been easier to obtain international agreement on specific terrorist tactics than it has been to obtain agreement on dealing with terrorists.

The Council of Europe, of which seven of the Mediterranean countries are members and two more have observer status, has tackled the problems of terrorism on several occasions. The first effort led to a European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism (1976). The Convention takes the pragmatic approach by enumerating specific offenses for which the normal political exception to extradition will not apply. The results, however, were disappointing. Although all of the 21 member states, except Ireland and Malta, signed it, as of June 1982 less than half of them had ratified it.

In 1980, the Council convened a conference at Strasbourg which took a much broader approach to the problem of terrorism. The Strasbourg conference and subsequent meetings produced no new convention but did contribute a number of specific suggestions aimed at combatting terrorism ~~with~~ ^{through} such measures as public education and the exchange of information among member countries.

In order to maintain the broadest possible consensus, the Council of Europe focused its efforts on how to combat its domestic terrorist groups. It set aside the vexing issue of external support for terrorism. This avoided problems arising from European dependence on oil from the Middle East and other economic interests in Mediterranean countries, European sympathies for the plight of Palestinians, and its desire to avoid blurring the problem of terrorism in democratic societies with the use of terrorist tactics by guerrilla groups in the Third World. Even then, it has been difficult to gain agreement.

It is difficult to imagine a cooperative effort among the Mediterranean nations except that which might be hastily nailed together in a crisis situation ~~that~~ ⁱⁿ involves the interests of several nations. The cooperative effort involved in the withdrawal and relocation of the PLO is an example. It certainly did not solve the Palestinian problem, but it probably did save a great many lives.

As for the future, continued international and subnational conflict seems likely to occur in the region. It remains to be seen whether any new government in Lebanon will be able to mend relations between the Christian and Moslem communities. The Palestinian problem has not been solved; Israel and the Arab countries remain at odds. Tensions continue between conservative and radical Arab regimes in North Africa and the Middle East. Added to these are the antagonisms between Shi'ite and Sunni Moslems, and between Moslem fundamentalists and secular regimes. The contest between Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario has not ended. Turkey and Greece have not resolved their differences over Cyprus. The growing population of ~~large~~ North African, Middle Eastern,

and Southern Mediterranean workers and refugees in Europe has provoked a right-wing backlash in several countries; these tensions remain.

Overlaying these regional conflict sets is the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.

These antagonisms may provoke open warfare between nations and will surely continue to lead to internal conflict, and subnational conflict that is at the same time international. Occasionally, these subnational conflicts will spill over into the maritime environment, as they have in the past. While it is not apparent at present that any of these will lead to protracted naval guerrilla warfare, they conceivably could lead to incidents of serious consequence.

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