

ASSASSINATION IN KHARTOUM

David A. Korn

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reviewed by DANIEL PIPES

In the minutes before 7 p.m. on March 1, 1973, a diplomatic reception was breaking up at the Saudi embassy in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. As the ambassadors left the party and dispersed to find their drivers, a volley of machine-gun fire rang out. Eight masked gunmen of Black September, a covert Palestinian organization, burst out from the shadows and commandeered into the embassy's main reception room all those not fleet of foot enough to escape. The diplomats were sat down on the floor and compelled to identify themselves by nationality, whereupon the assailants released most of them. They kept just five: two Americans, Ambassador Cleo Allen Noel, Jr. and chargé d'affaires George Curtis Moore; a Belgian; a Jordanian; and a Saudi.

Twenty-six hours of feverish negotiations ensued. On the evening of the 2nd, the Beirut headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) sent an order of execution to the terrorists via radio broadcast: "Why are you waiting? The people's blood in the Cold River cries for vengeance" ("Cold River" was the code word for executing the captives). Recordings of that broadcast have disappeared, but it appears that Yasir Arafat, then as now chairman of the PLO, personally delivered the order. Soon after he did, the two Americans and the Belgian were bound, lined up against a basement wall, and shot dead.

Mission accomplished, the eight assailants gave themselves up to the Sudanese authorities. Months of prevarication then passed—for no one in the early 1970s relished the prospect of crossing the PLO—before a Sudanese court, on June 24, 1974, sentenced the eight killers

to life in prison. This impressive-looking decision was actually a sham, for within hours Sudan's president had commuted the sentences to a mere seven years. He then dispatched the eight from his country by putting them on a plane to Cairo. Three of the prisoners promptly disappeared. The remaining five did in fact serve out their full sentences, with extra time tacked on at the end—a highly unusual event in the Arab countries.

David A. Korn, the author of *Assassination in Khartoum*, himself played a small part in the drama. In the mid-1960s he had worked for Moore, one of the two dead Americans; then, during the siege at Khartoum, he worked at the Department of State's Operations Center, doing what little he could to save the lives of his two colleagues. Twenty years later, he has published a study that suitably remembers the victims and honors their memory.

But *Assassination in Khartoum* is more than a compelling account of the incident and its repercussions: it has a current significance the author could not possibly have anticipated. With the recent signing of an Israel-PLO accord, Korn's meticulous inquiry raises important questions about the PLO as an institution, the character of its chairman, and American policy.

Bringing the murder of Noel and Moore back to public attention highlights the unpleasant fact that the PLO has on a number of occasions attacked American citizens. A 1986 Senate document lists forty-two incidents between 1968 and 1985 in which American citizens suffered depredations at PLO hands. The best-remembered took place in October 1985, when Leon Klinghoffer, an elderly invalid, was shot and thrown overboard the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro*. The

most deadly was the bombing that killed eighty-eight passengers on TWA flight 707 in September 1974 en route from Tel Aviv to New York. In other words, Americans have their own, serious problem with the PLO, quite independent of Israel's. Yet, if Jerusalem is ready to do business with the PLO, who are we Americans to hold back?

The question points to the odd logic whereby Americans tend to view their interests in the Middle East in terms of Israel's—and not just those Americans sympathetic to the Jewish state. The virulently anti-Zionist Talcott Seelye, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria, says he long opposed Menachem Begin's policies not because they harmed America but because he found them "anti-ethical to Israel's long-term interests"! Rep. John Bryant (D-Tex.) once introduced a bill to withhold U.S. aid from Israel in order "to protect the people of Israel from the extreme policies" of the Likud government.

The murder of Cleo and Moore led to another strange case of putting Israel first. Several pro-Israel organizations sought in early 1986, without success, to indict Arafat under U.S. law on criminal charges for his personal involvement in the Khartoum murders. The Department of State ought to have been delighted to find this ally in its effort to protect its own people from terrorism abroad. Not at all: State weighed in against such an indictment on the grounds that Arafat and his colleagues would someday be key to settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this case, a direct American interest—protecting our own diplomats—was shunted aside in favor of taking steps that might help secure peace for Israel.

This makes no sense. A great power like the United States needs to formulate its own policies. The PLO's having repeatedly attacked Americans means we have our own issues to settle with it. The tragic events in Khartoum and a close evaluation of American interests point to keeping open the possibility of taking a harder line on the PLO than Israel. We need not repeal the many anti-PLO regulations now on the books (a temporary waiver will do); nor need we welcome Yasir Arafat again to our shores. If Jerusalem has its own reasons to overlook the PLO's history of murder that doesn't mean we have to do the same. □

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