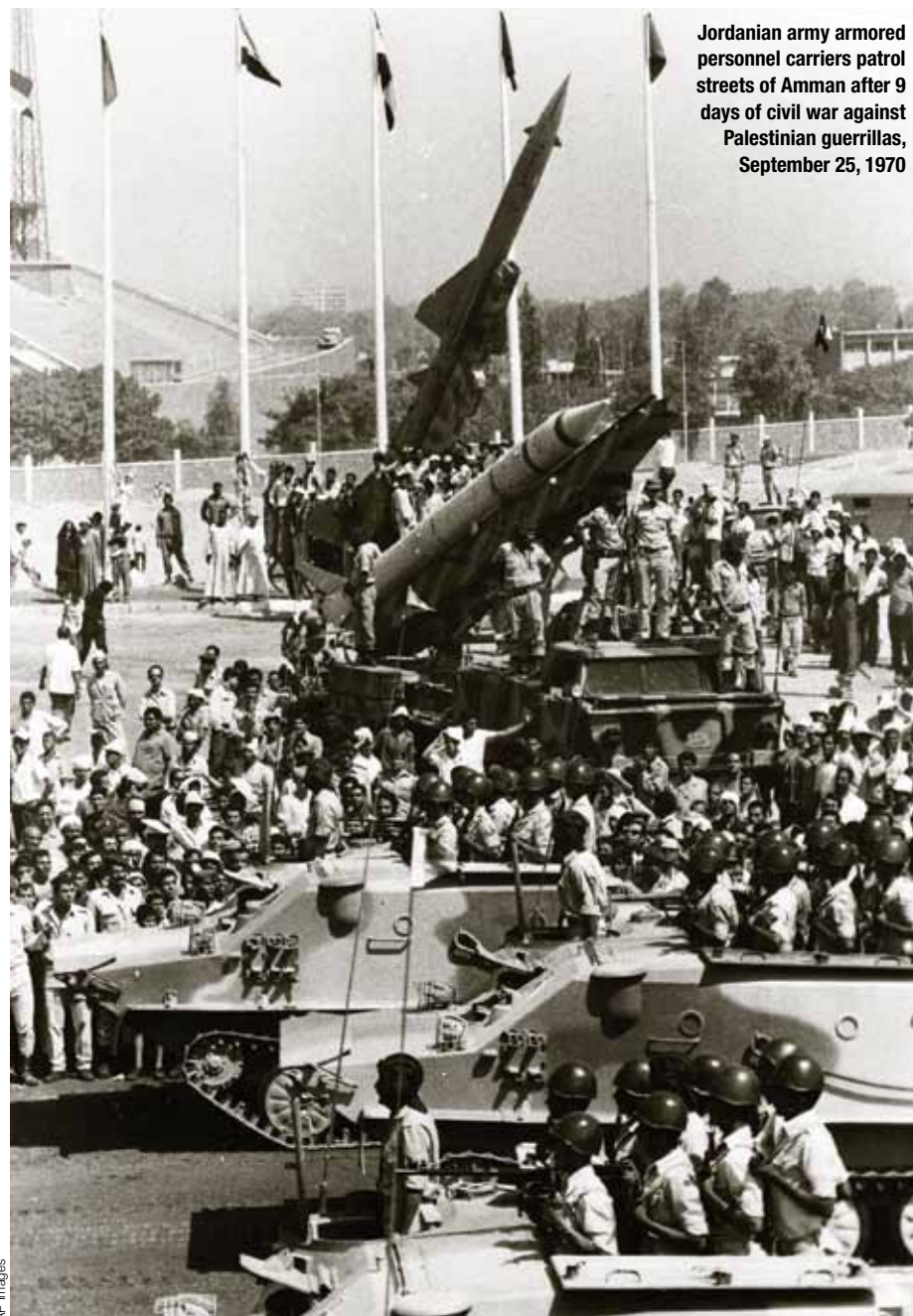


U.S. Joint Military Contributions to Countering Syria's 1970 Invasion of Jordan

By RICHARD A. MOBLEY



Jordanian army armored personnel carriers patrol streets of Amman after 9 days of civil war against Palestinian guerrillas, September 25, 1970

In the midst of the Jordanian civil war with Palestinians during September 1970, Syria conducted a short-lived armored incursion into northern Jordan. U.S. leaders, seeing Syrian intervention through the prism of Cold War politics, responded with extensive military preparations to intervene on behalf of Jordan's King Hussein and prepared to block Soviet intervention on behalf of Syria. When Syria withdrew its forces after 3 days of combat with the Jordanian army, U.S. decisionmakers not only praised the Jordanian resistance but also concluded that Syria's withdrawal was a victory for U.S. statecraft.

Recently declassified material provides a richly detailed account of how Washington quickly developed plans, deployed forces, and solicited Israeli military assistance in response to the rapidly developing crisis. The combination of these steps would have allowed U.S. or encouraged Israeli intervention to save King Hussein from a potential Syrian onslaught. Contemporary memoirs, public statements, and diplomatic cables suggest that several key international actors involved in the crisis acknowledged the import of the U.S. military moves.

A review of U.S. military behavior during this episode thus offers a case study on successful crisis decisionmaking, military planning, and operational deployments on behalf of a major ally faced with a sudden threat. Although set in the context of the 1970s, such a study is still relevant because it demonstrates how Washington effectively responded to the threat when U.S. popular will and military resources were sorely tested by ongoing conflict in Southeast Asia. U.S. strategy succeeded

Commander Richard A. Mobley, USN (Ret.), is an Intelligence Analyst for the U.S. Government.

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2009		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE U.S. Joint Military Contributions to Countering Syria's 1970 Invasion of Jordan				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 260 5th Avenue SW Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 8	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

from an American and a Jordanian perspective, according to memoirs and contemporary diplomatic messages. How the strategy affected Damascus is more difficult to determine because of the paucity of information on Syrian decisionmaking during the crisis, but the threat of U.S. or Israeli intervention must have weighed heavily on a Ba'ath party leadership that exhibited only lukewarm commitment to the intervention.

Strategic Context

U.S. leaders in September 1970 were concerned about the role of several actors and their behavior in three concurrent Jordanian crises, each posing different planning requirements: the Palestinian hijacking of airliners to Jordan (September 6 and 9), the commencement of Jordanian military operations against the Palestinian militias within Jordan (September 17), and the Syrian armored incursion into Jordan (September 20–22). The Palestinians and Iraq posed the more immediate threat to King Hussein given their military presence in Jordan. Planners appeared to treat Syria as a lesser threat because it had no forces in Jordan before its incursion. Finally, Washington suspected that Moscow might encourage, if not militarily support, adventures by its Arab allies.

President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, perceived that Moscow had been trying to exploit regional unrest throughout the summer of 1970.¹ Kissinger claimed that Moscow had foreknowledge of the invasion and later criticized Moscow for not quickly and visibly urging Syria to stop. Given such suspicions of Moscow, U.S. contingency planning focused on ways to block a Soviet intervention in the Middle East on behalf of Syria.

U.S. Planning to Defend Jordan

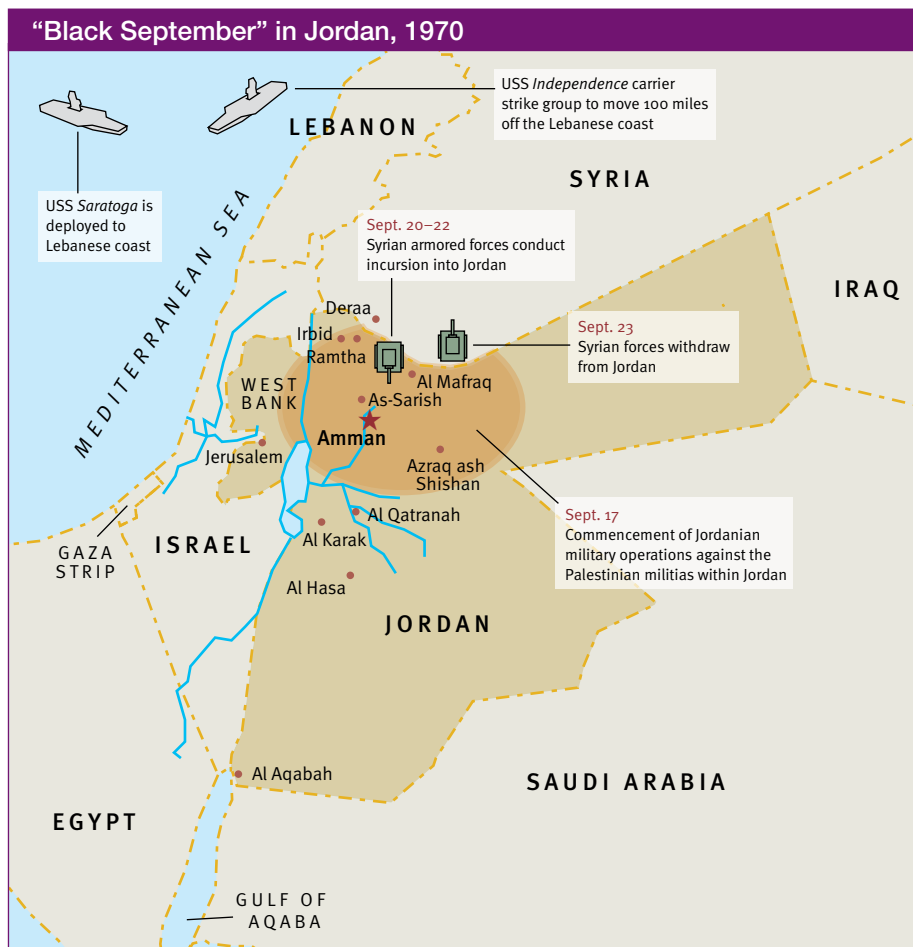
The United States in June 1970 began updating plans to support King Hussein if Syria or Iraq attacked. Kissinger had assembled the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), a crisis management team comprising principals from the White House, Department of State, Department of Defense (DOD), and Central Intelligence Agency in response to President Nixon's directive that the United States update its planning to support Jordan. U.S. planners were concerned about the size of Syrian and Iraqi tank inventories, which far exceeded Jordan's arsenal of 300 British Centurion and American M-60 tanks. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) assessed that

tanks—unlike the Fedayeen militias—would be vulnerable to airstrikes in the open Jordanian terrain. This concern with redressing the numerical imbalance and armored vulnerability in northern Jordan probably made invading tanks key targets in U.S. planning to defend Jordan against Syrian or Iraqi attack.

given suspicions of Moscow, U.S. contingency planning focused on ways to block a Soviet intervention in the Middle East on behalf of Syria

ordered the USS *Independence* carrier strike group to move 100 miles off the Lebanese coast and positioned six C-130 aircraft toward Turkey.³ USS *Saratoga*, the second carrier deployed to the Mediterranean, was then enjoying a port visit but would be en route to the same destination by September 15. An amphibious readiness group was continuing an exercise on Crete on September 11.⁴

On September 9–10, the WSAG sought to delineate the consequences of a protracted U.S. military operation in Jordan in support of the king and to assess the force posture required to deter Moscow should Israel move into Jordan. On September 10, WSAG meet-



The National Command Authorities again focused on Jordan when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked and flew three airliners there on September 6 and 9.² In response, Kissinger on September 9 convened the WSAG, which considered, fused, and recommended diplomatic and military courses of action for the Jordan crises in meetings occurring several times daily for the next 17 days. Following the hijacking (and as a likely result of the WSAG process), the JCS

ings set in motion the basket of plans that the United States would turn to during the Syrian intervention. Kissinger directed the group to prepare a plan to deter the Soviet Union if Israel intervened to support King Hussein against the Fedayeen, to review a contingency plan for U.S. intervention in order to support him against the Fedayeen should he request it, and to determine logistic support for Israel.⁵

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas Moorer, responded that the

JCS had been updating its contingency plans for Jordan since June 1970, but warned that “our first recommendation is that we not get involved.” If Washington decided to commit forces anyway, the JCS recommended airstrikes against ground units and lines of communications.⁶ A U.S. ground campaign was the least preferred option given the logistic difficulties—“a real problem,” in Admiral Moorer’s words—that the JCS anticipated U.S. forces in Jordan would encounter. Addressing the challenge of deterring Soviet intervention, the Chairman urged forceful measures: “We can’t do it half-way; we have to be convincing. The movement of one ship or squadron is a feeble gesture that won’t serve the purpose.”⁷

The WSAG updated its plans on September 15, with special emphasis on scenarios that the United States might face in Jordan.⁸ (Although the WSAG remained focused on Iraq rather than Syria as the primary external threat, many of the planning issues would have been similar for countering a Syrian armored force.) The WSAG and U.S. Embassy in Amman assessed that the Jordanian army could defeat the Fedayeen as long as it did not also have to fight outside troops. The U.S. Embassy also judged that the Jordanian army could even handle the Fedayeen and Iraqi

forces combined. The WSAG observed that the eruption of Fedayeen violence in other cities could spread Jordanian forces thin, however, and pursued options to save the king should he be unable to deal with the Iraqis.⁹

The complexion of the crisis changed on September 17 when King Hussein initiated hostilities against his Palestinian challengers. Rather than masking its military preparations, the United States sought to demonstrate that it could support Hussein and consequently revealed some of its precautionary military movements in U.S. Government press releases. The same day, Nixon told reporters that only the United States or Israel could stop an Iraqi or Syrian invasion of Jordan. Echoing the comment he had penned in a Kissinger memorandum, Nixon stated in a newspaper interview that day that he preferred that U.S. (rather than Israeli) forces come to Jordan’s aid.¹⁰ That night, he told Kissinger, “I made it clear . . . it would be fatal to the king if the Israelis came in . . . Jordan has to be strengthened to scare off Iraq and Syria. . . . We also have airplanes to strike. I want Europe mobilized in readiness if we do. I want to hit massively—not just little pinpricks.”¹¹

Despite Nixon’s initial views, the United States and Israel negotiated over the possibility of Israeli intervention several times during the crisis. They failed to reach final agreement over which country would pursue what military course of action, however, at least during the 3-day duration of the Syrian occupation of northern Jordan. Both retained the option of air intervention if necessary, and—as Syrian forces were preparing to withdraw—Israel advised that it would be prepared to conduct airstrikes against the Syrians. The Israelis mobilized forces in preparation for a possible ground intervention in Syria, although Tel Aviv steered clear of firmly committing to an invasion of Jordan.

The U.S. Navy’s reaction to the Jordan crisis consequently became more robust on September 17, although staying within the bounds of a “maximum rational response,” in the words of former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt.¹² The JCS ordered a third carrier battle group led by USS *John F. Kennedy* to depart the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Range off Puerto Rico and begin its Mediterranean deployment a few days early.¹³ A second amphibious readiness group led by USS *Guam* was to complete its loadout at Morehead City, North Carolina, and depart on September 18.¹⁴

In the Mediterranean, the JCS ordered USS *Saratoga* to depart Malta and join the *Independence* battle group in the eastern Mediterranean. The amphibious readiness group was to remain within 36 hours steaming time from Jordan. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird announced that the Sixth Fleet had moved units closer to the eastern Mediterranean, and DOD disclosed that *Guam* was ordered to depart the United States earlier than scheduled.¹⁵

As these forces steamed east, the WSAG concluded that carriers would provide most, if not all, of the airpower required to support the Jordanian army, conduct a show of force, or accomplish a noncombatant evacuation operation or resupply mission. The Navy had far more aircraft immediately available, and WSAG participants doubted that most of the bases near Jordan would be available for contingency operations. The WSAG concluded that Cyprus was the only viable base for this contingency given political sensitivities. The Air Force would require 7 days to bring in the supplies and equipment to support strike operations from there. Even then, the JCS estimated that the United States could generate about 50 tactical sorties daily from there to Jordan—only a 25 percent increase

the United States and Israel negotiated over the possibility of Israeli intervention several times during the crisis

above the 200 daily sorties expected from the *Independence* and *Saratoga* strike groups. The WSAG concluded that the additional land-based tactical sorties would be of marginal value, especially because the Navy would gain the capability to fly a total of 300 sorties daily when the USS *Kennedy* group arrived. Consequently, the WSAG recommended that the United States rely solely on carrier-based air in its planning to deal with Syria.¹⁶

Syrian and Iraqi public threats against King Hussein between September 17 and 19 raised the possibility that the carriers would soon see combat. President Hashim al-Atasi claimed that Syria would “spare no blood” to help the Palestinians, an insinuation that Damascus might send forces into Jordan. On September 17, Radio Damascus echoed this theme by reporting that the Syrian foreign ministry had warned Jordan’s ambassador that the “Syrian revolution cannot remain



Yasser Arafat and Jordan’s King Hussein walk to conference hall in Cairo, Egypt, to meet with other Arab leaders to sign peace agreement ending Jordanian civil war, September 27, 1970

AP Images

silent or idle about the massacres to which the Palestine revolution groups and the masses in Jordan are being exposed.”¹⁷

Syrian Incursion Begins Sunday, September 20

Damascus committed a reinforced division to the Jordanian civil war on September 20, probably in hopes of facilitating a quick Palestinian victory. The Jordanian army was making halting progress in defeating the Fedayeen, and Syrian leaders probably reasoned that a limited commitment might be sufficient to tip the scales on behalf of the Palestinians (or at least to help create a safe haven for them in northern Jordan without triggering Israeli intervention). Syria's Fifth Division (including elements of four Syrian brigades and the Palestinian Hittin Brigade) began invading northern Jordan at approximately 2 a.m. local time on September 20.¹⁸ More than 170 T-55 tanks and 16,000 troops initially supported the invasion, but Syria declined to commit its air force even after Jordanian fighters started to attrite the invasion force.

As fighting continued, the Jordanians repulsed two armored offensives and reportedly inflicted heavy losses on a Syrian armored brigade.¹⁹ The tanks had crossed near Ramtha and by 3 p.m. were 5 miles south of there.²⁰ They slowly moved toward Irbid, a Jordanian city only 45 miles north of Amman and under Fedayeen control. Complementing the ground campaign, Hawker Hunter aircraft attacked the Syrian tanks and set some on fire.²¹ They were grounded after nightfall, however, when at 6:15 p.m. the Jordanians reported that two armored brigades operating on a broad front were attempting a third assault.²² British reporting noted, “Jordan forces are reported as quote doing badly and they are outnumbered and undertanked unquote.”²³ By 9 p.m., three Syrian brigades with 215 tanks—the equivalent of a division—were located near Irbid.²⁴

Fortunately, despite all the Syrian activity, the Iraqi expeditionary force remained uncommitted. They moved east, presumably to remain clear of a Syrian-Jordanian battleground. The Syrian 6th Armored Brigade—normally stationed in Deraa—reportedly moved toward Mafraq. Iraqi officers also asked the Jordanian air force to depart the Mafraq airfield and fly to the H-5 airfield 75 miles east, explaining that they did not want Iraqi forces near the airfield drawn into the contest.

Faced with this rapidly growing threat so near the capital, King Hussein asked for U.S.

assistance three times on September 20.²⁵ Zaid Rifai, the close advisor who delivered the king's written request, clarified that Jordan would accept air support from any country, including Israel, in his comments to the U.S. Ambassador in Amman. In a telephone conversation between the Foreign Office and White House staff, the British also explained that they had confirmed that the king “definitely requested [Her Majesty's Government] to pass on to the Israelis a request on the Syrian troops which are massing. The request seems to have been made first this morning and then at about 1830 Jordan time this evening.”²⁶

The U.S. Ambassador also recommended that the United States consider an Israeli “spooking” operation to eject the Syrians from Jordan. Commenting that “the Israelis are experts at this,” the Ambassador suggested that Damascus might withdraw if distracted by the massing of Israeli forces opposite Syria and by low-level Israeli reconnaissance over Damascus. The reasoning was that endorsing such an initiative would at least “give us something to say to the king.”²⁷ (Amman would repeat this recommendation the next day, noting that “escalation of Israeli activity, real or manufactured signs, Iraqi activity, careful leaks re contingency plans U.S. and others might contribute” to a Syrian withdrawal.)²⁸

Faced with all these requests, the WSAG encountered difficulties making timely assessments given delays in obtaining current tactical intelligence and in communicating with King Hussein in war-torn Jordan. Kissinger commented, “We did not possess enough intelligence or targeting information to respond to the king's pleas with American forces.” Kissinger asked Israeli ambassador Yitzhak Rabin to forward a request for the Israeli air force to fly reconnaissance missions over Jordan at daybreak on September 21 because the United States lacked information. The JCS subsequently directed the fleet to develop reconnaissance and strike plans to be used against the Syrian forces in Jordan. The WSAG even approved sending a delegation from the USS *Independence* to Tel Aviv to pick up last-minute intelligence from the Israelis on the disposition of Syrian forces for targeting purposes.²⁹ (The White House envisioned that this visit would signal the Soviets that the United States and Israel were cooperating closely.³⁰)

The United States also approached Israel about possible Israeli air and land intervention. Late on September 20, Rabin responded that Israeli military leaders were not con-

vinced an air campaign would be sufficient to dislodge the Syrians. The Israelis—who promised to take no action without consulting the United States—advised that they would make an assessment after receiving the next day's photo reconnaissance reporting. Kissinger later observed that the United States kept a careful watch on Israeli actions and noted that they were moving quietly and calling up reserves. Within 36 hours of the Syrian incursion, Israel concentrated additional forces on the Golan Heights.³¹

Urgent Jordanian Requests for Assistance

Monday, September 21

The ground order of battle in northern Jordan still favored Syria on the morning of September 21. Syria had nearly 300 tanks and 60 artillery tubes near Ramtha and Irbid.³² Some tanks had entered Irbid but

the U.S. Ambassador recommended that the United States consider an Israeli “spooking” operation to eject the Syrians from Jordan



President Nixon in Oval Office, September 25, 1970

remained in groups rather than dispersing in the city streets. Other tanks remained in groups outside town. Construction work at Irbid suggested the Syrians were preparing to hold it. A Syrian second echelon comprising supply vehicles and bulldozers was positioned between the Syrian border and Irbid.³⁴ The units included the Fifth Division headquarters, two armored brigades, and one tank battalion. In other words, Syria had committed as much as a third of the 900 tanks available between Deraa and Damascus to the operation. Jordan had a smaller force—three infantry brigades and 120 to 140 tanks—in the area.³⁴ Syrian forces continued to advance, and by 5 p.m. had captured two key cross-roads, including an intersection serving as a gateway to Amman, only 45 miles south.³⁵

Despite successes on the ground, Syria was also sensitive to the U.S. naval buildup. On the morning of September 21, the foreign ministry denied that Syria had intervened in Jordan and stated that such accusations were a “prelude for U.S. military intervention in the area, particularly since the U.S. had been moving its Sixth Fleet and sending its naval units to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean for some time.” The Syrian spokesman then demanded the withdrawal of the Sixth Fleet.³⁶

Jordan's requests for assistance continued because the Syrian force was undefeated and civil war raged elsewhere in Jordan. King Hussein phoned the U.S. Ambassador at 3 a.m. local on September 21 and asked that he relay an urgent message to Nixon:

Situation deteriorating dangerously following Syrian massive invasion. Northern forces disjointed. Irbid occupied. This having disastrous effect on tired troops in the capital and surroundings. After continuous action and shortage supplies . . . I request immediate physical intervention both air and land as per the authorisation of government to safeguard sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of Jordan. Request immediate air strikes on invading forces from any quarter plus air cover are imperative. Wish earliest word on length of time it may require your forces to land when requested which might be very soon.³⁷

Rifai added that the king's first preference was for a U.S. strike, but because the situation seemed to be “coming to the worst, the most important thing was to hit the Syrians

now,” according to the American Embassy in Amman.³⁸

The WSAG continued to investigate the possibility of Israeli air and land intervention, despite President Nixon's earlier reservations.

King Hussein phoned the U.S. Ambassador and asked that he relay an urgent message to Nixon

In fact, Nixon relented. He had told Kissinger early on September 21 that he had decided to approve an Israeli ground action and dictated a message to be relayed to Rabin.

U.S. Embassy personnel simultaneously engaged the Israelis in Tel Aviv on the details of an Israeli intervention. To support its planning, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) sought operational information to avoid inadvertently striking Jordanian units. They warned that they were beginning to doubt that an air operation alone would be effective, although it might have worked 36 hours earlier.³⁹

The Israelis agreed to intervene “in principle” but awaited answer to their first battery of questions for U.S. assurances. On September 21, Washington promised diplomatic support, including the use of a veto on Israel's behalf in the United Nations Security Council.

Washington agreed not to hold Israel responsible if its actions led to the death of hostages taken from the airliners that had been hijacked to Jordan. The United States explained that it did not know whether King

Hussein would formally request Israeli assistance or establish methods of Jordanian-Israeli communications, although it noted that King Hussein had repeatedly requested or approved Israeli airstrikes.⁴⁰

In particular, Washington cited the increase in Sixth Fleet readiness to reassure the Israelis that the United States could act to prevent Soviet intervention:

We have and will continue to make clear to the Soviets our support for Israel's security and integrity and its right to live within defensible borders. In the present crisis, the U.S. has augmented the Sixth Fleet; it has also taken other readiness measures. These clearly imply a decision not to permit Soviet intervention in the conditions under discussion. As for specific measures the



President Nixon with Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, aboard USS *Saratoga* prior to deployment to Mediterranean Sea

*U.S. may take to prevent Soviet intervention, these would depend on the circumstances and the situation that exists at the time. We have contingency plans for these eventualities.*⁴¹

To bring the point home, DOD that day announced naval movements toward the Mediterranean and the heightened alert for U.S. Army units in Europe, the 82^d Airborne Division, and supporting C-141 airlift units based in North Carolina.⁴² The *Kennedy* battle group and *Guam* amphibious readiness groups continued their Atlantic crossings en route to the eastern Mediterranean. *Kennedy* was to enter the Mediterranean by Friday, September 25. Two more nuclear attack submarines (*Whale* and *Gato*) were to enter the Mediterranean between September 25 and 29.⁴³

A message from Admiral Isaac Kidd, commander of Sixth Fleet, revealed that the fleet was pondering the tactical implications of engaging the Syrian armor. Admiral Kidd warned that it would be “virtually impossible” to guarantee that the United States would not penetrate Syrian airspace because some of the tanks were close to the Syrian border. He also addressed rules of engagement and prohibited hot pursuit of enemy aircraft into Syria. Finally, Kidd admonished his subordinates to ensure that Navy aircraft did not lead any Syrian fighters back to the carriers after an attack.⁴⁴

Syrian Defeat and Withdrawal Tuesday, September 22

The Syrian forces again attempted to breach Jordanian lines on the northern ridge-line of the Ajnun Mountains and attacked from Hawara toward Irbid by midday. After advancing 3 kilometers toward Irbid and As-Sarish around 10 a.m. local, they withdrew after falling under Jordanian tank and artillery fire—behavior similar to that they had displayed the day before.⁴⁵ Rifai advised the U.S. Embassy that Jordan had repulsed Syria’s attempt to move south of the Irbid/Irbid junction/Ramtha line using tanks, artillery, and aircraft.⁴⁶ Hawker Hunter fighter-bombers continued to attack the Syrian armor in relays of eight aircraft, with intervals of half an hour between sorties.⁴⁷ The small Jordanian air force—with fewer than 50 Hawker Hunter and F-104 fighters—ultimately flew as many as 250 sorties during the crisis.

Airstrikes, logistic shortfalls, and mechanical breakdowns began to attrite the Syrian armor, and the Israelis, who had flown reconnaissance missions over Jordan on September 21 and 22, assessed that the Syrians would encounter serious logistic difficulty within 3 to 4 days. (One battalion reportedly had only 8 operational tanks out of an inventory of 31 due to breakdowns.⁴⁸) By midday on September 22, approximately 50 of 200 Syrian tanks were inoperable.

Jordan concluded that it had achieved tank parity with the Syrians.⁴⁹ Amman had achieved this through attrition of Syria’s Fifth Division and by reinforcing its own forces in the north during the night of September 21–22. An estimated 200 Jordanian tanks were located in the battle zone.⁵⁰ These losses and the shift in the correlation of forces probably account in part for Syria’s decision to withdraw from Jordan on the night of September 22–23.

As the United States and Israel prepared to attack the Syrian invaders, Jordan’s need for assistance dropped, given its successes on the ground. The U.S. Embassy in Amman advised late on September 22 that Amman had less need of an Israeli ground attack, although King Hussein still sought external air support. The Embassy warned that some Jordanian army units might even conclude that invading Israelis would be a greater threat than the Syrians and raised the specter of a conflict arraying Jordanian units against those of Israel, Syria, and perhaps Iraq.⁵¹ Even a successful Israeli intervention “would strain the king’s personal standing” with his subjects and fellow Arabs. The Ambassador also warned that Israel might attempt not only to force a withdrawal but also to “so smash the Syrians that they won’t rise again for a long time.”⁵² The American Embassy in Tel

the Embassy warned that some Jordanian army units might conclude that invading Israelis would be a greater threat than the Syrians

Aviv similarly warned that the United States risked being faced with a “large Israeli force entrenched on Irbid Heights and perhaps reluctant to leave there.”⁵³

Ultimately, the king was ambivalent about airstrikes and against Israeli ground intervention. The Embassy quoted King Hussein’s response, as relayed through Rafai, who said the king “prefers action from up high” (an allusion to the Israeli air option) and that “if anything is to be done low it should not be here but away” (a suggestion that he would prefer Israeli forces invade Syria, not Jordan). Rifai said the principal aim was to force Syrian withdrawal because if they stayed, it would complicate even further the “job that the government has in



President Nixon meeting with Secretary of State Kissinger, Vice President Ford, and Chief of Staff Alexander Haig in Oval Office

White House Photographic Office Collections

Amman.” He concluded that, more importantly, Syrian success might “give the Iraqis the idea that they too can get away with something in Jordan.”⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Israel mobilized reserves and moved the equivalent of a division into the Beit Shin area, from where⁵⁵ they could intervene at almost any point in the Jordan Valley. The U.S. Embassy, however, also judged that the mobilization was most likely precautionary and conducted only to give Israel the option of intervening.⁵⁶ The Israeli government had not taken steps to ready Israeli public opinion for an intervention in Jordan.⁵⁷ Despite the assurances being given in Washington, the Embassy subsequently commented that the government of Israel “appeared neither to feel its security seriously threatened nor anxious to intervene in fighting.”⁵⁸

Perhaps also sensing Israeli ambivalence, the WSAG continued to orchestrate the U.S. military response to the crisis and ordered DOD to accelerate collection of target information. It also requested additional contingency plans: one to deliver equipment to Israel should it engage the Syrians, and another to address a breakdown of the Suez Canal truce while Israeli forces were engaged in Jordan. The WSAG also reviewed plans for coping with a Soviet response to an Israeli attack on Syria.⁵⁹

With most of the planning completed, Washington promised King Hussein that the United States would promptly provide materiel assistance. By September 22, both DOD and the Central Intelligence Agency had developed plans to airlift military equipment to Jordan. U.S. European Command also prepared to send U.S. military field hospitals to Jordan within 11 hours of notification. The airborne brigade in Germany remained on alert, with one airborne battalion capable of arriving in Jordan with only 8 hours warning. Two battalions from the 82^d Airborne Division remained on alert.⁶⁰

The *Saratoga* and *Independence* battle groups remained south of Cyprus, along with an amphibious force with one battalion landing team embarked. The Navy had committed a cruiser and 14 destroyers to the operation.⁶¹ *Kennedy* and *Guam* were to enter the Mediterranean on September 25 and 26, respectively. The JCS ordered another tanker and four destroyers to the Mediterranean to support the *Kennedy*, and the United States

deployed six more P-3s to deal with the Soviet problem.⁶²

Aftermath

Wednesday, September 23

Syrian forces completed their withdrawal on September 23, when they started to regroup near the Syrian side of the border.⁶³ In the latest fighting, the Jordanians reported destroying 70 to 75 tanks,⁶⁴ but the final losses reached 135 tanks and 1,500 casualties, according to subsequent interviews with the 40th Brigade commander.⁶⁵ The Israelis ultimately assessed that Damascus had lost 120 tanks: 60 to 90 damaged by Jordanian attack and the rest due to mechanical breakdowns.⁶⁶ In contrast, Jordan reportedly lost only 16 tanks and an armored car and sustained 112 casualties.⁶⁷

WSAG members remained concerned that Damascus might again intervene in the ongoing civil war to create a liberated zone for the Palestinians in northern Jordan.⁶⁸ Talking points prepared for a WSAG meeting stated that U.S. and Israeli plans for intervention were “in good shape.”⁶⁹ WSAG recommended that the United States continue to move additional naval units into the Mediterranean, and on September 25, the National Security Council recommended that the Sixth Fleet retain all augmentees and maintain the “present state of advanced readiness.”⁷⁰

Participants in the crisis attributed the Syrian withdrawal to several factors, among them changes in Israeli and U.S. military posture (including the naval surge), Jordanian military effectiveness, the costs and risks to Syria of escalation in what was to have been a low-risk operation, and pressure Moscow might have imposed on Damascus. According to a memorandum that Kissinger forwarded to the President, King Hussein extended his thanks to the United States and the Israelis for “an effective spooking operation,” which he felt was a major contribution to the Syrian withdrawal. He asked that the United States extend his thanks to Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir while advising that he did not need Israeli assistance.⁷¹

Israeli and U.S. participants drew out similar explanations. Ambassador Rabin cited four reasons for the Syrian withdrawal:

- The United States raised its regional military posture.
- The Jordanian Arab army fought well.

■ Faced with strong Jordanian army resistance, Damascus assessed it would have had to increase its troop commitment to the campaign—a move that risked confrontation with Israel.

■ The Soviet Union pressured Damascus to withdraw.⁷²

Prime Minister Meir said that U.S. “political and tactical steps” contributed to the general deescalation in the region. Moreover, Israel’s readiness to intervene “did not escape the knowledge of the Syrians and their [Soviet] military and political advisers.”⁷³ Kissinger assessed that Israel’s obvious mobilization and readiness measures and Jordan’s unexpectedly strong resistance played major roles in the Syrian withdrawal. He also criticized the Soviets for not playing a helpful role during the past few weeks.⁷⁴

Finally, naval power was probably the most visible tool the United States had to pressure Syria, although it was just one of many levers Washington relied on to buttress King Hussein during the Syrian invasion. The rapid naval augmentations gave the Sixth Fleet tremendous striking power—far more than could be generated by land-based air—within days of the decision to generate forces. At a minimum, the augmented fleet might have been used to deter Soviet intervention in the crisis, but it also promised rapid destruction of the invasion force if Israel balked or the Jordanian army had not fought so well. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Freedom: Kissinger in the White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 234–238.

² Alexander Haig, *Inner Circles* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 242–243.

³ Memorandum from Henry Kissinger to Principals, “Middle East Contingencies,” September 9, 1970, Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) Meetings, box H076 (Nixon).

⁴ Kissinger memorandum to the President, “Contingency Planning for Jordan,” September 16, 1970, National Security Council (NSC) Files, Country Files, box 615 (Nixon); telephone conference (telcon) between Kissinger and Nixon, September 17, 1970 (Nixon).

⁵ Kissinger memorandum to the President, “Contingency Planning for Jordan,” September 16, 1970.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Memorandum from Brigadier General Alexander Haig to Richard Helms forwarding "remarks attributed to the President," September 19, 1970, Haig Chronological Files, box 972 (Nixon).
- ¹¹ Department of State Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXIV, Middle East Region and Arabian Peninsula, 1969–1972*, document 262, "Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," available at <<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v24/d262>>.
- ¹² Elmo Zumwalt, *On Watch* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Books, 1976), 298.
- ¹³ Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) briefing notes, September 18, 1970, Operational Archives, Naval Historical Center.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Daniel Dishon, *Middle East Record 1969–1970* (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1977), 849.
- ¹⁶ Minutes for WSAG meeting, September 19, 1970, WSAG Minutes, box H-114 (Nixon); memorandum from Kissinger to the President, "Use of U.S. Land-based Air over Jordan," September 22, 1970 (Nixon).
- ¹⁷ Dishon, 847.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 850.
- ¹⁹ Memorandum from Kissinger to the President, "Situation in Jordan," September 20, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 615 (Nixon).
- ²⁰ Message from British Embassy Tel Aviv, September 20, 1970, FCO 17/1065 (PRO).
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Haig, 248; U.S. Embassy Amman 201639Z Sep 70, NSC Country Files, Middle East, box 619 (Nixon); memorandum from Kissinger to the President, "The Situation in Jordan," September 22, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 615 (Nixon).
- ²³ Message from British Embassy Tel Aviv.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Memorandum from Kissinger to the President, "Situation in Jordan," September 20, 1970.
- ²⁶ Telcon between Sir Denis Greenhill and member of Kissinger's staff, September 21, 1970, PREM 15/124 (PRO).
- ²⁷ U.S. Embassy Amman 201745Z, "Syrian Threat," September 20, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 619 (Nixon).
- ²⁸ U.S. Embassy Amman, 211005Z, September 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 619 (Nixon).
- ²⁹ Memorandum for the record by Haig, "Kissinger's Briefing of White House Staff," September 25, 1970, Haig Chronological Files, box 972 (Nixon).
- ³⁰ Telcon between Kissinger and President, September 23, 1970 (Nixon).
- ³¹ Memorandum for the record by Haig.
- ³² Secretary of State 211824Z, September 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, box 619 (Nixon).
- ³³ U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv 210945Z, September 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 619 (Nixon).
- ³⁴ Secretary of State 211824Z, September 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, box 619 (Nixon).
- ³⁵ U.S. Embassy Amman 211310Z, September 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, box 619 (Nixon).
- ³⁶ Dishon, 852.
- ³⁷ Memorandum by Foreign Office Emergency Unit, September 21, 1970, PREM 15/124 (PRO).
- ³⁸ U.S. Embassy Amman, 211435Z, "Syrian Threat," September 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 619 (Nixon).
- ³⁹ U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv cable 154454, September 21, 1970, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1970–73, POL 27 (National Archives, College Park, MD).
- ⁴⁰ Secretary of State cable 155165, "Syrian Intervention in Jordan," September 22, 1970, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1970–73, POL 27 (National Archives, College Park, MD).
- ⁴¹ Memorandum, "Question #3," September 24, 1970, Haig Chronological Files, box 972 (Nixon).
- ⁴² U.S. Investigations Services press release, "Syrian Units Involved in Jordan Fighting, U.S. States," September 22, 1970, FCO 17/1065 (PRO).
- ⁴³ CNO briefing notes, "Sixth Fleet Augmentation," September 25, 1970, Operational Archives (Naval Historical Center).
- ⁴⁴ Commander, Sixth Fleet, 210915Z, September 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, box 619 (Nixon).
- ⁴⁵ U.S. Defense Attaché Office Tel Aviv, September 22, 1970, NSC Meetings, box H-029 (Nixon); memorandum from Haig to Kissinger, conversation with Ambassador Rabin, September 22, 1970, box 972 (Nixon).
- ⁴⁶ U.S. Embassy Amman 230945Z, September 23, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, box 619 (Nixon).
- ⁴⁷ U.S. Defense Attaché Office Tel Aviv, September 22, 1970.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ U.S. Embassy Amman 230945Z, September 23, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, box 619 (Nixon).
- ⁵⁰ U.S. Defense Attaché Office Tel Aviv, September 22, 1970.
- ⁵¹ U.S. Embassy Amman 221325Z, "Israeli Air/Land Strike," September 22, 1970, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1970–73, POL 27, box 2056 (National Archives, College Park, MD).
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv 221525Z, September 22, 1970, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1970–73, POL 27, box 2056 (National Archives, College Park, MD).
- ⁵⁴ Memorandum from Kissinger to the President, "The Situation in Jordan," September 23, 1970. U.S. Embassy Amman 221840Z, September 22, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 619 (Nixon).
- ⁵⁵ Memorandum from Kissinger to the President, "The Situation in Jordan," September 23, 1970; U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv 240920Z, "Military Sitrep September 17–23," September 24, 1970, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1970–73, POL 27, box 2056 (National Archives, College Park, MD).
- ⁵⁶ U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv 221525Z, September 22, 1970, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, Arab-Isr, POL 27 (National Archives, College Park, MD).
- ⁵⁷ Memorandum from Saunders to Kissinger, "The Situation in Jordan," September 23, 1970, WSAG Meeting, box H076 (Nixon).
- ⁵⁸ U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv 240920Z, "Military Sitrep September 17–23," September 24, 1970.
- ⁵⁹ Memorandum from Kissinger to President, "WSAG Actions-Jordan," September 22, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 615 (Nixon); memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, "Meeting on Jordan," September 22, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 615.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Memorandum from Kissinger to President, "Meeting on Jordan," September 22, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 615 (Nixon).
- ⁶² Memorandum from Kissinger to President, "WSAG Actions-Jordan," September 22, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 615 (Nixon).
- ⁶³ Memorandum, "Kissinger's Briefing," September 25, 1970, Haig Chronological Files, box 972 (Nixon).
- ⁶⁴ U.S. Embassy Amman 230945Z, September 23, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 619 (Nixon).
- ⁶⁵ Dishon, 854.
- ⁶⁶ Memorandum from Kissinger to President, "The Situation in Jordan," September 23, 1970.
- ⁶⁷ Dishon, 854.
- ⁶⁸ Memorandum from Saunders to Kissinger, "The Situation in Jordan," September 23, 1970.
- ⁶⁹ WSAG talking points, September 24, 1970, WSAG Meetings, box H076 (Nixon).
- ⁷⁰ Memorandum from Robinson to Haig, "Status of Alert Forces," September 25, 1970, Haig Chronological file, box 972 (Nixon).
- ⁷¹ Memorandum from Kissinger to President, "Morning Situation Report on Jordan," September 25, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files, Middle East, box 615 (Nixon).
- ⁷² Secretary of State 156646, September 23, 1970, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1970–73, Arab-Isr, POL 27 (National Archives, College Park, MD).
- ⁷³ Dishon, 855.
- ⁷⁴ Telcon between Kissinger and Phil Potter, September 23, 1970 (Nixon).