



***Jordanian Crisis, September 1970,
Also known as Black September***

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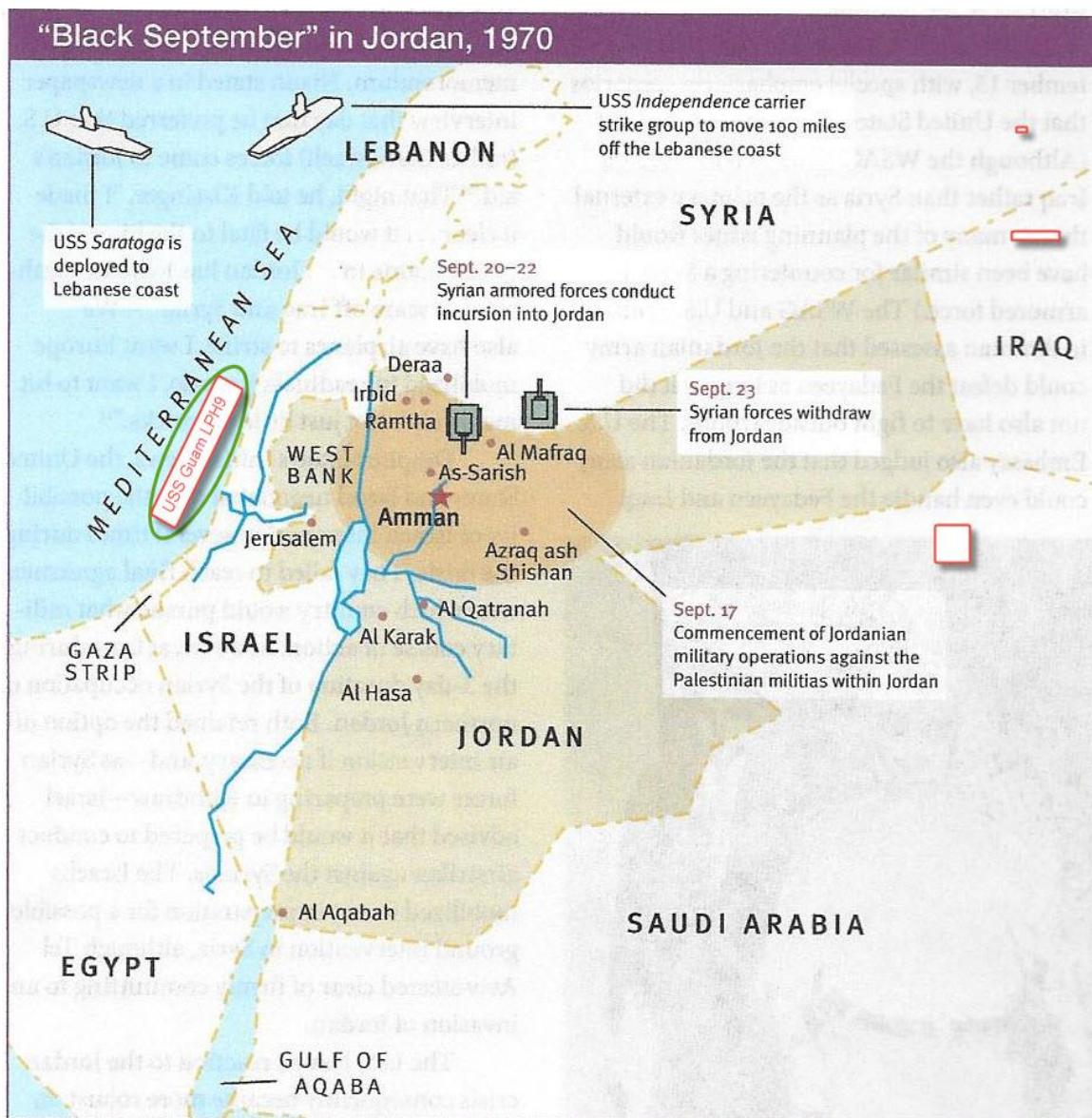
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Introduction

The *USS Guam* LPH-9 had a proud 33 year commission between 1965 and 1998. During that time the *Guam* played many different roles serving the U.S. Navy and America proudly. This article covers September 1970 when the *USS Guam* spent 45 days cruising up and down the eastern portion of the Mediterranean Sea ready to fly in Marines to rescue American citizens caught in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Jordanian civil war of September 1970, also known in the Arab world as Black September, was an attempt by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the more radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to topple Jordanian King Hussein and seize control of the country. The PFLP sparked the war when it hijacked four jetliners, diverted three of them to a Jordanian air strip, and after removing the hostages, blew the planes up during a TV broadcast. The PLO kept 58 hostages, of which 39 were Americans, for three weeks as human bargaining chips. Even though PLO leader Yasser Arafat worked for the release of the hostages, he also turned his PLO militants loose on the Jordanian monarchy. A bloodbath ensued.



Background

Understanding the Black September 1970 crisis is a delicate interweaving story involving several nations:

Jordan – Native inhabitants represented by the Jordanian Armed Forces under the leadership of King Hussein, backed by the United States. Hussein wanted Palestinians out of Jordan.

Palestine – Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), some living in Jordan, under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. Objective was to capture the northern part of Jordan around Irbid what the rebels called the “liberated region”.

Syria – pro-Russian backed forces lead by President Hafez al-Assad. Tried to help Palestine by attacking Jordan but failed.

Israel – teamed up with the U.S. by providing Air Force support to drive the Syria out of Jordan.

Soviet Union – supported the Syrian attack on Jordan. Both the Soviet Union and the United States had approximately 50 ships, including submarines, in the Mediterranean during the crisis.

United States – President Nixon and Henry Kissinger sent carriers USS *Saratoga*, USS *Independence* and USS *Guam* to show a powerful military response in support of the Jordanian monarchy.

Detailed Chronology

At the end of July 1970, Egypt decides to accept the plan proposed by U.S. Secretary of State William Rogers, which called for an immediate cease-fire in the war of attrition between Egypt and Israel, and for an Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 242. After Egypt, Jordan also announced that it accepted the plan.

The dramatic decision brought about an intensification of the Palestinian battle against Jordan. The radical left organization in the PLO, George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Naif Hawatmeh's Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front – General Command decided to undermine Hussein's regime in order to ensure failure of the “Rogers Plan” and perhaps the deposition of the king. In their opinion, the Hashemite regime had to be eliminated in any case, since it was conservative and pro-Western.

Yasser Arafat, head of Fatah, feared that the move to depose Hussein was premature. The Jordanian army numbered 55,000 well-trained soldiers as well as an armored corps and an air force, whereas the Palestinian organization numbered at most about 15,000 fighters armed mainly with light weapons. Arafat chose to play both sides against the middle and to maneuver in the ensuing chaos. On one hand he didn't stop the radical organizations; on the other he didn't come out openly against Hussein.

At the beginning of September 1970, the activities of the leftist Palestinian organizations in Jordan turned into open defiance of King Hussein himself. On September 1st, a failed attempt on Hussein life was made while he was on his way to the Amman airport. On September 6th, members of the Popular Front hijacked three planes: A Swissair plane and a TWA plane were hijacked to the airport in Zarqa, an additional plane belonging to Pan American was hijacked to the Cairo airport. Three days later a British plane was hijacked to Amman. The passengers were held hostage. The hijackers demanded the release of Palestinian prisoners in various countries. A spokesman for the Popular Front said in Beirut that the hijackings were carried out in order to “teach the Americans a lesson because of their long-standing support of Israel.”

Yasser Arafat did not condemn the hijackings, which aroused an international protest against the Palestinians. Hussein knew that the international community would now be more sympathetic toward a decisive battle against the Palestinian organizations and that Nasser, who wanted to promote the Rogers Plan, would be less supportive. The Jordanian king quickly lost control of his kingdom.



Thousands Hurt, Killed in 2 Days Civilians Caught

Tanks Reportedly Shelling Strongholds Of Arab Guerrillas in Northern Areas, Amman Described as Under Royalists

Don't Intervene, Arab Guerrillas Warn Americans

BEIRUT, Sept. 18 (AP)—The Palestinian guerrillas who hijacked four airliners to the Middle East, today declared that every American in the Middle East will become their target if the United States sends troops into Jordan.

A statement from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine said:

"Every American and every American interest will be a target."

"No American will be safe if there is a U.S. military intervention."

"We have shown the world that we can carry out our threats."

The Popular Front still holds 54 hostages from the three hijackings to Jordan. Thirty-eight of them are Americans.

At the height of the drama of the hijacked planes, the Palestinians declared the area of Irbid in the northern portion of Jordan a "liberated region" and announced they were preparing for "the showdown." Hussein's inner circle feared a Palestinian revolt and stated the time had come to defeat the Palestinians. They estimated that the army could expel the Palestinians from the large cities within two to three days. Hussein made the decision to attack assuming there were only a few hours before the all-out and unavoidable confrontation. On the morning of September 16th, Hussein declared martial law. On September 17th the military attack began. Patton tanks from the 60th armored brigade entered Amman from all sides and attacked the headquarters of the Palestinian organizations. The projection that the Palestinians could be defeated in days proved incorrect. The Palestinians surprised the army with their stubborn resistance.

On September 18th a Syrian armored division invaded northern Jordan. The opening of an additional front against Jordan was the desired scenario for the Palestinians. The Jordanians were afraid Syria aspired to exploit the civil war to expand greater Syria. But the Jordanians confronted the Syrians with the 40th armored brigade and managed to halt their advance. Syria was forced to take their troops out of northern Jordan.

The swift Syrian withdrawal was a severe blow to Palestinian hopes. Jordanian armored forces steadily pounded their headquarters in Amman and threatened to break them in other regions of the kingdom as well. The Palestinians agreed to a cease-fire. Hussein and Arafat attended the meeting of leaders of Arab countries in Cairo, where Arafat won a diplomatic victory. On September 27th Hussein was forced to sign an agreement which preserved the right of the Palestinian organizations to operate in Jordan. For Jordan it was humiliating that the agreement treated both sides to the conflict as equals.

The agreement declared that Jordan “would support the Palestinian liberation movement”; “that both sides would withdraw from the cities” and “that all the prisoners would be released”. According to maximum estimates there were several thousand Palestinian casualties. Politically Arafat and the Palestinian organizations were not dealt a decisive blow because Hussein did not succeed in completely expelling them from Jordan.

On September 28th Nasser of Egypt died, at the age of 52, of a sudden heart attack which may have been triggered by the tremendous pressure caused by Black September. With Nasser’s death, the most important protective umbrella of the Palestinians in Jordan disappeared. Arafat realized his position was weakened and on October 31st signed an agreement designed to return control of Jordan exclusively back to King Hussein. Of course factions of the Palestinian movement decided not to honor the agreement so conflicts continued between the Palestinians and the Jordanian army.

After Black September

The saying that history repeats itself seems to be true in the Middle East. The tragedies tend to repeat themselves again and again. Even today there is constant fighting and uprisings in the area. For Jordanian identity September 1970 was a turning point. The continuing effort made by King Hussein paved the way for Hussein to gradually relinquish his desire for total sovereignty over the West Bank. The American and Israeli support of Jordan strengthened Jordanian recognition that stability of the kingdom depended on the support of the West. Palestinian leadership proved that it wasn’t aware of the limitations of its power and had wrongly estimated the willingness and capability of Arab countries to fight for its people. For Yasser Arafat Black September was a test. He was asked to honor agreements and repeatedly violated them. So the fighting continues to this day.

Impact on the USS Guam

The *Guam* departed Moorehead City, North Carolina with 1,500 Marines and Helicopter Squadron 365 onboard September 18, 1970 at full speed heading for the eastern Mediterranean Sea arriving September 26, 1970.

Taking station south of the island of Cyprus the *Guam* spent the next 35 days going up and down the coast of Israel ready to land Marines to evacuate Americans if necessary. The *Guam* made so many trips along the coast that the ship was running over its own garbage. Joining the *Guam* in a show of American assertive power was the USS *Saratoga* and the USS *Independence*. If you pay attention to the event dates you realize the fighting had stopped by the time the *Guam* arrived September 27, 1970. *Guam* stayed on station the month of October just in case the fighting would erupt again. The *Guam* had spent 45 days at sea before pulling into Naples, Italy for liberty call November 2, 1970. After Naples the *Guam* also stopped in Barcelona, Spain for a 4-Day visit. The *Guam* returned to the States in late November 1970.

Note of Thanks

A special thank you goes out to the officer and enlisted men of the USS *Guam* and Marines. Between the Peruvian Earthquake May-July 1970 and the Jordanian Crisis September-November 1970 the *Guam* smartly displayed its ability to handle diverse assignments reflecting the highest standards of naval service and commitment to duty. Author at the Minoan ruins on the Isle of Crete and in Barcelona, Spain.



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