

# Fluid alliances

## The Syrian government’s support for and complicity in terrorism

President Bashar al-Assad’s regime has complicated and fluid connections to Sunni Islamist extremism, but whatever the current nature of this relationship, Al-Qaeda-inspired extremism is fast becoming part of the internal security threat now facing Damascus, writes **Andrew Tabler**

**KEY POINTS**

- Syria continues to host a range of Palestinian militant organizations, though the bloody uprising in the country since 2011 has had a significant effect on those groups’ ties with the Assad regime.
- Syria has long supported Hezbollah with logistics, weapons, and political backing, the loss of which would cause significant problems for the group’s ability to maintain its military confrontation with Israel.
- Sunni jihadists appear to be participating in the uprising in Syria, and Al-Qaeda is encouraging operatives to move into Syria to take advantage of any security vacuum in the event of the downfall of the government.

On 10 May 2012, two near-simultaneous suicide bombings on a busy road near a military intelligence building in Damascus, Syria, killed 55 people and wounded 372 others, according to the Syrian Ministry of the Interior. The government immediately blamed “foreign-backed terrorists” – a phrase often used by the regime to refer to opposition entities that have emerged since early 2011 to demand President Bashar al-Assad’s resignation and the overthrow of the government.



On 10 May 2012, two near-simultaneous suicide bombings on a busy road near a military intelligence building in Damascus, Syria, killed 55 people and wounded 372 others. One of the bombs left a 2 m deep crater on the busy road near the building (seen here).

However, the attacks bore many of the hallmarks – particularly the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) – of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which claims to be a Sunni anti-government jihadist group formed by veterans of foreign conflicts who returned to defend the Syrian people and which has become increasingly active in Syria since it emerged in January 2012. Responsibility for the attack was claimed in a video dated 12 May, purportedly released by JN. The authenticity of the video

was nonetheless questioned by members of pro-Al-Qaeda internet forums, and JN released a statement claiming the video was “fabricated and full of errors”, indicating that some force, possibly including the regime, may be trying to manipulate JN messaging. Since any Sunni jihadist involvement in the rebellion is likely to stiffen the regime’s Alawi support base – which follows an offshoot of Shia Islam that hardline Sunni Islamists consider heretical – this type of manipulation is entirely plausible.

Opposition activists – including members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the most prominent armed opposition movement – have denounced JN as a front for Syrian intelligence false-flag operations, and accused the government of carrying out a string of deadly attacks since late-2011. “The regime is the primary beneficiary from these bombings, because it wants to show the public that the FSA is the one killing civilians before the eyes of the [United Nations (UN)] monitors,” FSA deputy commander Malik al-Kurdi told *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* in May.

Uncertainty about the precise nature of JN is revealing of the fluid nature of the Assad regime’s contacts with Islamist extremist groups in recent years. For instance, at least some tacit government support was provided during the 2000s to extremists transiting Syria to participate in the Iraqi insurgency, while more direct funding, arming, training and provision of safe haven continues to be afforded to several militant groups in the region. In particular, Lebanese Hizbullah and Hamas have housed many of their senior operatives in Damascus, which has also served as a key meeting place and an important facilitation hub for people and weapons. However, at other times, Damascus has appeared to share intelligence on these same extremist networks with the US government.

With the Assad regime under severe domestic and international pressure owing to its brutal reaction to the uprising in Syria, it is critical to understand the drivers and dynamics of the Syrian government’s interactions with these groups, as well as the implications of the possible fall of Assad for these relationships, and the opportunities that could arise for jihadist groups to exploit a disruptive post-Assad operating environment.

In this context, the presence and activities of JN in Syria clearly complicate an already complex environment in which government and opposition forces are nominally observing a ceasefire, but which in reality is showing increasing signs of fracturing. These activities highlight the fact that the crisis in Syria is already drawing in other groups and influences with radically different agendas to that espoused by the ‘official’ Syrian opposition. This potentially toxic mix risks pushing Syria further down the path of civil war – regardless of the intervention of the UN and international community.

### Syrian support for terrorism

Syria was placed on the US Department of State’s list of designated state sponsors of terrorism on 29 December 1979. Syria’s original designation was due to its support for and hosting of a number of Palestinian militant groups that actively used terrorism (such as hijackings and bomb attacks) against international targets as part of their struggle against Israel and its allies. Syria continues to host a range of Palestinian militant organizations, although the 2011 uprising has had a significant effect on those groups’ ties with Damascus.

Following Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution and Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Syria expanded its support for militants in the region to include a number of pro-Iranian groups, including the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO), a shadowy part of Hizbullah. The US government holds Hizbullah responsible for the 18 April 1983 bombings of the US and French embassies in Beirut, Lebanon and the 23 October 1983 bombing of the US Marine barracks in Lebanon, resulting in the death of 241 US servicemen.

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Syrian support for Hizbullah continued in the 1990s to include shipments of small-arms and short-range rockets. Such support, as well as Syria’s continued occupation (officially called a “presence” by Washington at the time) of Lebanon, led the administration of George W Bush to further tighten sanctions on Damascus through the May 2004 Syrian Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Restoration Act. This and associated measures banned all US exports to Syria (including military or dual-use items on the US munitions and commerce control lists) and severed all banking transactions with the state-owned Commercial Bank of Syria.



Assad’s support for Hizbullah increased ahead of and following the 2006 Lebanon war, including via the provision of more sophisticated anti-tank and longer range rockets and missiles, including the Syrian M-600r, M-600M and Syrian Scud-D, according to a 2010 report in the *Wall Street Journal* citing US and Israeli sources. Other media reports quoting the same sources outline Hizbullah’s stockpile of these weapons along the mountain range just inside the Syrian border. Israeli sources have told *IHS* that Israel is likely to strike this area, which it considers a staging area for Hizbullah, in a future conflict.



Syrians wave revolutionary flags and chant slogans at a night protest against President Bashar al-Assad in a neighborhood of Damascus on 2 April 2012. The Assad regime is under severe domestic and international pressure owing to its brutal reaction to the uprising in Syria.

Finally, in February 2012, Meshaal moved his offices to Doha, Qatar while Marzouk relocated to Cairo, according to a *BBC* report on 26 February. Marzouk told the *Associated Press* in March: “The Iranians are not happy with our position on Syria, and when they are not happy, they don’t deal with you in the same old way.” Soon after, Haniyeh declared his organization’s support for the Syrian people against the Assad regime. Sources in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, one of the strongest blocs in the Syrian opposition, say their historic ties with Hamas mean that relations between the Assad regime and Hamas are now beyond repair.

Despite its split with Hamas, Syria maintains direct connections with a number of other Palestinian militant groups. It still hosts the headquarters (officially referred to as “media offices”) for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC); the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Fatah Intifada, and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Many of these groups stand to gain Syrian and Iranian support at the expense of Hamas and other groups that have broken with Damascus, and have been vocal supporters of the Assad regime, despite the crackdown.

In a January 2012 interview with *Arab Nyheter*, Abu Imad al-Rifai, PIJ leader in Lebanon, said: “We do not see that President Assad’s regime is going to fall in the foreseen future. We believe that the logic of reforms will win in Syria at the end of the day.” Similarly at a January 2012 PFLP-GC meeting in Beirut, the organization issued a statement outlining “the dangers which Syria is experiencing from the US administration and its international and regional allies” and that the “Palestinian People and resistance forces are standing by the Syrian people and leadership”.

Syrian support provided for these groups is more often than not overt, in the form of office provision, residency permits for members of each organization, weapons and training camps located throughout Syria. Most weapons provided are in third countries such as Lebanon

**Palestinian reaction to the uprising**

The Assad regime’s brutal suppression of the Syrian uprising has cost it alliances with Palestinian militant groups it has been hosting, as well as other Palestinian groups in the region.

In reaction to the regime’s brutal crackdown on anti-regime protestors, Hamas has scaled back its presence in Damascus. The group’s political bureau, headed by Khaled Meshaal, had been headquartered in the capital since being ejected from Jordan in 1999, as has the group’s “Intifada” military committee, which supervises military operations, smuggling and training activities. However, Hamas has now

virtually closed its Syrian offices, with media and security sources saying only a few lower ranking officials and their families remain.

This cooling of relations may have caused tension within Hamas between the Damascus-based Meshaal and his deputy, Mousa Abu Marzouk, and Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas head of government in Gaza. As the scale of the regime’s crackdown intensified over the past year, Hamas began exploring its options in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. This reportedly angered Iran, a close ally of Syria, who attempted to torpedo Hamas talks on alternative sources of assistance and safe havens outside Syria.



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The aftermath of an attack on a Syrian military intelligence building in the city of Aleppo on 10 February 2012, which left 28 people dead. Unnamed US officials told McClatchy Newspapers that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was probably behind the blasts. The attack was claimed on 27 February 2012 by Jabhat al-Nusra.



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On 24 January, a video released on prominent Islamist forums by the previously unknown Al-Manara al-Bayda media wing claimed to be the first statement of a newly formed Syrian jihadist group. The group identified itself as Jabhat al-Nusra, or the Support Front, although banners in the background suggested the group's full name was Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham Min Mujahideen al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad, or the Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad.

(where PFLP-GC and Fatah Intifada operate), as well as directly to Hamas inside the Palestinian territories.

Syria maintains indirect, murkier ties to various Palestinian splinter factions, most notably Fatah al-Islam, a Sunni jihadist group formed on 26 November 2006 after it split from Fatah Intifada (a pro-Syrian group) which eventually took over the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in May 2007. A three-month bloody battle with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) followed before the group was routed in early September.

Direct Syrian complicity in the group's taking control of the camp remains unclear. Most of the foreign Arab fighters who joined Fatah al-Islam after its creation entered Lebanon illegally from Syria using smuggling routes through Wadi Khaled in north Lebanon and via bases along the Lebanon-Syria border manned by pro-Syrian militant factions (including

PFLP-GC and Fatah Intifada). These fighters included the group's founding leader, Shakir al-Absi, who had been jailed by Syrian authorities in 2002 on charges of attempting to lead a resistance operation in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. In 2004, Absi was sentenced to death in absentia by Jordan for planning the murder of US diplomat Laurence Foley in Amman in 2002. Syria declined Jordanian extradition requests and Absi was released in 2005.

### Syrian relations with Hizbullah

In sharp contrast to Sunni militant groups, Hizbullah's support for the Assad regime has remained resolute, as the group seeks to safeguard what it views as a critical strategic relationship with Damascus. Syria has long supported Hizbullah with logistics, weapons and political backing, the loss of which would cause significant problems for the group's ability to maintain its military confrontation with Israel.

As such, Hizbullah has carefully balanced its public statements on the Syrian uprising. After keeping relatively quiet the first few months of the uprising, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah used a speech on the 26 August "International al-Quds Day" to express his organization's appreciation for Syria's support for the Palestinian cause, especially "Iranian support [that] passes through Syria". As a solution to the uprising, Nasrallah called for "great and important reforms" to "calm down the situation" in order to head off the "New Middle East Agenda" that he claimed sought to break Syria into parts.

But as the Assad regime's promises of reform failed to materialize, Hizbullah began to push for a "political solution" to the crisis through dialogue. On 17 April 2012, Nasrallah told *Russia TV* that his organization had offered to mediate between the regime and the opposition, but claimed the latter were being encouraged by "certain Arab countries" in the Gulf to fight Damascus. He also claimed that such dialogue was necessary because Al-Qaeda fighters had joined the opposition's cause.

Throughout the course of the uprising, Syrian opposition leaders have repeatedly claimed that Hizbullah is providing support for Assad regime operations against protestors. For instance, FSA commander Brigadier-General Hussam Awak told *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* on 1 March 2012 that Hizbullah-armed snipers,

explosives experts and guerrilla warfare specialists were assisting the regime in suppressing the revolution. Reports also surfaced in mid-May of tactical operations involving Hizbullah fighters against the FSA around Zabadany. FSA spokesman Colonel Khalid al-Hammoud told *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*: “Hizbullah elements are primarily deployed in the Al-Qasir area and the surrounding villages in the Homs countryside, as well as in Zabadany, Rankus, and Madaya in the Rif Dimashq governorate, as these areas are close to the Lebanese borders and they allow the Hizbullah elements to easily enter and leave the country.”

Reliable, non-opposition evidence of direct Hizbullah support for the regime remains scarce in open sources, but opposition statements clearly reflect and confirm a decades-old relationship between Hizbullah and Syria that has only become closer over time.

Syria was key to Hizbullah’s inception during Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, when Syrian authorities allowed Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Pasdaran to transit Syria to Lebanon where they established the IJO, a terrorist group controlled by Iran under the umbrella of Hizbullah that claimed credit for major bombings of foreign facilities and kidnappings of foreigners in Lebanon. Syrian support for Hizbullah has expanded from the provision of safe haven to serving as the conduit for weapons shipments from Iran to Hizbullah in Lebanon. Weapons arrive via military flights from Tehran to Damascus.

Following the expansion of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in South Lebanon following the 2006 Lebanon war, Syria has directly provided a number of long-range rocket and missile systems that allow Hizbullah to shoot over the UNIFIL zone and strike targets deep inside of Israel. These weapons include M-600R, a Syrian-manufactured solid fueled rocket with a range of 200 km, M-600M, a Syrian-manufactured guided solid-fuel missile and Syrian modified and manufactured Scud-Ds, with a range of 700 km. According to media reports and Israeli intelligence analysts, while many M-600s have transited to Lebanon, most Scud-Ds remain deployed on bases just inside the Syrian border, where Hizbullah reportedly trains on the systems with the full knowledge and support of Syrian Air Force Intelligence.

Israeli and US officials cited in a *Wall Street*



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*Journal* report on 30 June 2010 highlighted the transfer in 2009 of sophisticated radar technologies from Iran to improve Syrian air defenses. According to these officials, sharing of radar information by Syrian authorities would enable Hizbullah to bolster the effectiveness of its missiles and target incoming Israeli aircraft.

Despite these close ties, the resulting Israeli build-up to counter these moves makes it less likely that Hizbullah would attempt to support any last-ditch efforts by Assad to save the regime by stirring up a conflict between Hizbullah and Israel in Lebanon. The group’s exact motivations remain unclear, but US government officials speculate that the organization is saving its Syrian-supplied arsenal to defend Lebanon or to serve as a second-strike capability against Israel in the event it attacks Iran’s nuclear program.

### Islamist extremists and Al-Qaeda

In a video released to jihadist websites on 11 February 2012, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on Muslims to support rebels fighting Syria’s “pernicious, cancerous regime”. He also implied that Sunni Islamists were already participating in the fighting, saying: “The resistance of our people in Syria is escalating and growing despite all the pains, sacrifices and blood.”

The video came after two bombs killed at least 28 people in Aleppo on 10 February. Unnamed US officials told *McClatchy Newspapers* that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was probably behind the blasts. They cited intelligence reports that AQI had already carried out bombings in Damascus on 23 December 2011 and 6 January 2012 after Zawahiri ordered the affiliated group to join the Syrian uprising.

US counter-terrorism officials believe the group has moved operatives into Syria, with one official suggesting the jihadists “are seeing space [in Syria], seeing a vacuum, an opportunity to bounce back, and they are taking advantage of it”.

In line with Zawahiri’s claim of an expanding Sunni jihadist role in the Syrian uprising, on 24 January 2012, the Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad (Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahideen al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad: JN) announced that it had joined the rebellion against the Syrian regime. In a video released to a pro-Al-Qaeda internet forum, the group said it was responding to growing calls for jihadists to defend the Syrian people against the country’s security forces.

The group’s leader, Al-Fateh Abu Muhammad al-Golani, said JN’s objective was to “bring back the rule of God’s law [sharia, or Islamic

law] on Earth” and to “avenge the honor and the spilled blood of those who have been wronged [by the government of President Bashar al-Assad]”. Golani portrayed the group as part of what he claimed was an uprising by the ummah (international Muslim community), and boasted that his group would be the “cleaving sword” that would end the oppression of the Muslim people in Syria.

The reference to “Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad” in the group’s full name also indicates that at least some of the group’s fighters have previously been engaged in jihad across the border in Iraq.

Since its formation, the group has claimed responsibility for a string of attacks across Syria, including the 17 March attack on a police headquarters and air force intelligence office in Damascus that killed at least 27 people. It also admitted responsibility for the 24 April bomb attack on the Iranian Cultural Centre in Damascus, which killed three people, as well as the 27 April suicide bombing in the Maidan district of Damascus that killed 10 people.

Opposition groups have expressed skepticism about Al-Qaeda or affiliated jihadist group involvement in these attacks, claiming the precise nature of the blasts indicates that the regime either allowed the groups to carry out the attacks or staged them directly. Similar doubts about the authenticity of JN were revealed via discussions on jihadist forums

after the January 2012 announcement, with some forum commentators speculating that the video featured actors, rather than genuine jihadists. Although no motive for such a deception was posited, some forum members claimed the tone of the message, the way the militants were dressed, and the lack of information provided were all unusual for a jihadist

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group’s first message. Another forum member, who claimed to be familiar with Islamist activity in Syria, said he had not heard of the group in the underground.

Despite doubts about the nature of JN, it is entirely feasible that jihadist veterans have returned from Iraq and are now participating in the Syrian uprising. Following the 9/11 attacks on the US, Syria – which many claimed had common cause against Sunni Islamist militants due to its own war against the Sunni Mus-

lim Brotherhood from 1979-82 – shared intelligence with the US on Al-Qaeda and its affiliates that US officials claimed “saved American lives”. However, as relations soured ahead of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and the Syrian government began allowing “volunteers” to assemble to fight the US invasion (with one early muster point located across from the US Embassy in Damascus), Syria’s position on its interactions with such groups shifted to a stance of “turning a blind eye” as operatives transited Syrian territory en route to the Iraqi theater to join AQI.

It also became clear that the Assad regime’s knowledge of Sunni extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda did not result just from monitoring, but also from the regime’s collaboration with such groups to achieve Syria’s foreign policy objectives in neighboring states.

For years, the exact number of fighters transiting Syria was unknown, with US officials pointing to passports of foreign fighters seized in Iraq with inscriptions by Syrian passport control officers that the entrant intended to transit to Iraq to wage jihad. As Iraq slipped into an insurgency and civil war, the number of jihadist networks crossing and using Syria territory increased, including elements of AQI. With Washington’s initiation of the surge and counter-insurgency campaigns in late-2006-early-2007, hard evidence began to appear of extensive jihadist fighter networks in Syria. In particular, a database seized in September 2007 by coalition forces in Sinjar, just inside the Iraqi frontier from Syria, contained details of hundreds of foreign fighters transiting from Libya, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, among others, into Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007. Syrians accounted for 50 of 595 foreign fighters, around 8 per cent of the total. This flow of Syrian nationals into Iraq is likely to have given AQI strong institutional knowledge of how to transit and operate in Syria – a major concern for US policy and intelligence officials concerned with Syria’s large stockpile of chemical and biological weapons slipping outside state control.

The Sinjar documents – declassified by the *Combating Terrorism Center (CTC)* at West Point in late 2007 – also provide valuable insights into the exact use of foreign fighter networks by the Syrian regime. The documents showed that around 100 different Syrian AQI “co-ordinators” helped provide ser-



A series of images from the video released by Jabhat al-Nusra on 27 February 2012 relating to a suicide attack in the Syrian capital, Damascus, on 6 January 2012. (Top left) The alleged bomber, identified as Abu al-Baraa al-Shami. (Top right) Reconnaissance of the target area in Damascus before the attack. (Bottom left) The moment of detonation. (Bottom right) The aftermath, showing dead and wounded security force personnel.



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(Left) A screenshot from the video released by Jabhat al-Nusra on 27 February 2012, entitled *Revenge Attacks in the Name of the Noble Women of Syria*. (Center) Colonel Riyad al-Asad, seen here, announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army – the most prominent armed opposition movement – on 29 July 2011. The FSA has denounced Jabhat al-Nusra as a front for Syrian intelligence false-flag operations. (Right) The government has blamed “foreign-backed terrorists” – a phrase often used by the regime to refer to opposition entities that have emerged since early 2011 to demand President Bashar al-Assad’s, pictured, resignation and the overthrow of the government – for the string of bombings in Syria since December 2011.

vices to bring foreign fighters into Syria, mostly through Damascus International Airport, into Iraq. In early 2008, the US Department of the Treasury sanctioned four members of AQI’s “Abu Ghadiyah” network, named after the nom de guerre of its Iraqi founder, Badran Turki Hishan al-Mazidih. Interestingly, the networks relied heavily on donations of the foreign fighters themselves, which pumped money into the local Syrian economy through purchases of food and safe houses in Damascus, Latakia, and throughout eastern Syria for the transiting fighters.

Uncovering these databases, and other intelligence, led US Special Forces to carry out a successful raid on Abu Ghadiyah at Al-Sukariyya farm, a base for foreign fighters transiting to Iraq on the Syrian side of the Syria-Iraq border, on 26 October 2008. Despite pledges by the Assad regime that it was willing to cut off foreign fighter flows under the ‘engagement’ policy of President Barack Obama’s administration, the “rat lines” of fighters remained open. The continued flow of fighters was a serious sticking point between Damascus and the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki until his relationship with Iran improved following his re-election in 2011, when Damascus’ Iranian sponsor reportedly pressured Assad to curtail the transit of foreign fighters. According to a *Christian Science Monitor* report from February 2012, the flow of AQI members from Iraq to Syria has led to a decrease in blasts in Iraq.

While it is entirely possible that Al-Qaeda-affiliated individuals, or at least those inspired by their ideology and agenda, are operating in Syria, it clearly does not represent the Syrian opposition’s non-violent or violent tracks.

The FSA has over time morphed into a ‘franchise’ organization including deserters abroad in Turkey, deserters operating in Syria, and militias defending local protests. None of these strands support the bombing of installations where civilians would be killed.

However, considerable concerns persist about the presence of Islamist extremists in Syria’s Idlib province, traditionally a center of conservative Islamism in the country and a base of the Muslim Brotherhood’s 1979-82 armed uprising against the Assad regime. That act cost the lives of between 10,000 and 30,000 Syrians, and remains a huge source of local resentment. In many ways this province remains the ‘twilight zone’ of the Syrian uprising, with Revolutionary Councils and FSA units that are influential in other areas of the country competing for influence with a whole host of groups about which the US government has limited knowledge. It is in this environment that many officials fear Al-Qaeda or aligned groups could find fertile ground.

However, the diverse nature of Syria’s Sunni community – with tribal, ethnic, and commercial ties competing with organized Islam in the country – may limit Al-Qaeda’s ability to gain a foothold. In a post-Assad Syria, the traction of conservative Islamist or extremist groups would not likely extend beyond northwest Syria. Whether this would change as fighting drags on is open to speculation.

Regardless, polling of Syrian opposition groups indicates that Syria’s support for groups such as Hamas would likely continue in a post-Assad Syria, as would resistance to Israel. But support for the Iranian-backed Hezbollah as the vehicle for this resistance would be seriously in question.

**Conclusion**

The uprising in Syria has seen a disintegration of many of the regime’s close connections to regional militant groups it had previously strongly backed, such as Hamas. Groups such as PIJ and PFLP-GC, however, with whom Damascus has long had an extremely close relationship, may also be reluctant to disown their hosts.

Hizbullah, meanwhile, fearing the loss of one of its most important patrons, will continue to back the regime while treading carefully in its public diplomacy, out of concern for its own image in Lebanon and the region.

The regime’s connections to, and support for, Sunni Islamist extremism has been complicated and fluid, but whatever the current nature of this relationship (if any), Al-Qaeda-inspired extremism is fast becoming part of the internal security threat now facing Damascus.

As President Assad’s fall or managed departure is likely to take longer than most Western, Turkish and Arab policymakers might like to admit, Syria seems set to be an arena for competing interests in 2012 and beyond. The longer the bloodshed goes on, the more sectarian the conflict may become, providing fertile ground not only for extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda to establish a presence, but Iranian affiliates as well. ■

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