

## Duplicity in Damascus

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When it comes to al Qaeda, Syria gets it coming and going. This past Sunday, U.S. helicopters targeted an al Qaeda operative on Syrian territory who shuttled terrorists into Iraq. Syria condemned the strike as a violation of its sovereignty and a "serious aggression." Earlier in October, a massive car bomb detonated in Damascus, killing 17. Even before the smoke cleared, Syria's Assad regime accused Sunni Muslim fundamentalists from abroad-- i.e. al Qaeda -- of perpetrating the attack. Meanwhile, regime spokesmen described Syria as a "victim" of international terrorism.

The characterization of Syria as "victim" was ironic not only because Damascus has been a proactive member of the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1979 -- sponsoring Hamas and Hezbollah, among others -- but because just one day before the attack, the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia levied a mammoth civil judgment against Syria for "providing material support and resources to Zarqawi and Al Qaeda in Iraq."

The verdict awarded \$414 million to the families of two U.S. contractors -- Jack Armstrong and Jack Hensley -- beheaded in Iraq in September 2004.

Due to the opaque nature of the authoritarian Assad regime, it will likely never be clear who was actually responsible for the bombing. Syria routinely engages in conspiracies, so it's no surprise that conspiracy theories have proliferated regarding the culprit, with explanations alternately implicating the Iranians, the Israelis, and even the Assad regime itself. Adding to the uncertainty, some Western-based al Qaeda analysts say the assault lacked many of the organization's signature traits.

Notwithstanding the speculation, let's assume for the moment that al Qaeda did sponsor the attack. If so, it should have come as no surprise to Damascus: As the experiences of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan demonstrate, al Qaeda has a track record of attacking its sponsors.

Since 2002, the Assad regime has facilitated the movement through its territory of al Qaeda fighters bound for Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. It has allowed these insurgents to train in Syria and has provided sanctuary to al Qaeda-affiliated killers of Americans. By and large, this policy purchased Syria immunity from attacks. Along the way, however, these terrorists appear to have planted local roots.

In the lead up to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, when it became clear that Syria was helping shuttle Islamist insurgents to Iraq, Washington warned Damascus of the folly of this policy. U.S. diplomats in Damascus repeatedly told the Syrian government that Islamists posed a threat to the secular nationalist regime.

Damascus's logic was based on its opposition to the establishment of a pro-Western government in Baghdad. As then Foreign Minister Farouq Shara said in 2003, "Syria's interest is to see the invaders defeated in Iraq." But the Assad regime failed to take into account the dynamic of the al Qaeda's relations with its "friends." In Pakistan, for example, the intelligence service long supported al Qaeda, but the state nonetheless remained a high value target of the organization.

In al Qaeda's evolving strategy, targeting is not contingent on a state's political orientation or on the assistance it receives from governments. Basically, the organization has no qualms about biting the hand that feeds it, whether the patron is Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, or Syria. In this regard, if the Syrians are telling the truth about who perpetrated the attack, it is a clear case of the chickens coming home to roost.

Ultimately, Damascus's newfound problem with al Qaeda may change the Assad regime's permissive attitude toward the group, but it's unlikely to have any impact on Syrian support for Hezbollah and Hamas. These longstanding relationships with Islamist terrorist organizations are closely linked to the 30-year strategic alliance between Damascus and Tehran.

For the next U.S. administration, Syrian support for al Qaeda should prove a cautionary tale about the limits of diplomatic engagement in curtailing Syrian support for terrorism. The Assad regime has trucked with Islamist terrorists for decades, and provides no indication that it would be willing to sever these relationships. Senior Israeli officials -- including likely incoming prime minister Tzipi Livni -- have stated that a peace deal is contingent on Syria's abandoning Tehran, forsaking terror, and joining the Western camp. Syria has responded emphatically and repeatedly that this kind of strategic reorientation is not in the cards.

During the presidential debates, there were sharp disagreements as to how Washington should best treat rogue states. Regardless of whether the next

administration is led by Barack Obama or John McCain, however, many observers believe that Washington will look to reengage in high-level diplomacy with Damascus and perhaps even consent to mediate Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations. Indeed, there are some indications that the Bush administration is already pursuing this tack.

Changing Syria's orientation would be of great benefit, but experience suggests it's not a realistic hope. While many excuse Syrian ties to Hamas and Hezbollah as "cards" that will someday be traded during negotiations, the revelations about the ties to al Qaeda highlight just how inimical the Assad regime's worldview is to U.S. interests. Support for terrorism appears to be intrinsic to the regime. Given this dynamic, U.S. diplomacy with Damascus stands little chance of success.

David Schenker is the director of the [Program on Arab Politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Arab%20and%20Islamic%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchAreas\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Arab%20and%20Islamic%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchAreas) at The Washington Institute. ❖

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