

# Syria's Role in Regional Destabilization:

## An American View

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



### Articles & Testimony

In the aftermath of Israel's air operation over Syria, Dr. Andrew Semmel, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy and Negotiations, warned that Syria might have a number of "secret suppliers" for a covert nuclear program. Syria is reported to have thousands of rockets with ranges of up to 56 miles positioned along Syria's southern border with Israel, while longer-range missiles armed with chemical warheads are believed to be positioned further from the border. At the Sixth Biological Weapons Convention Review Conference in November 2006, John C. Rood, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, specifically cited Syria as being engaged in research and development "for an offensive BW program."

During his testimony to Congress on September 10, 2007, General David H. Petraeus, the U.S. commander in Iraq, presented maps illustrating Syria's pivotal role as the source of foreign fighters entering Iraq. One of his maps showed three arrows that illustrated infiltration routes from Syria into Iraq; they were labeled "Foreign Fighter Flow." A week earlier, in an interview with al-Watan al-Arabi, Petraeus described how Syria allows thousands of these insurgents to arrive at Damascus International Airport and then cross the Iraqi border.

The UN commission investigating the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri has implicated several members of Syrian President Bashar Assad's inner circle, including his brother, intelligence chief Maher Assad, and brother-in-law and head of military intelligence, Asef Shawkat. The UN investigation and the international tribunal established in March 2007 pose an existential threat to the Assad regime, which has an overriding priority to insulate itself from the consequences of the Hariri murder.

Syria has sponsored terrorist organizations for decades. The U.S. Department of Defense determined that Syria and Iran were involved in the October 1983 attack on the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut that killed 241 U.S. military personnel. In 2001, a U.S. grand jury pointed out that Saudi Hizbullah, which had been responsible for the 1996 Khobar Towers attack killing 19 U.S. Air Force personnel, used Syrian territory for training; indeed, the planners of the attack met at the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine in Damascus.

During last summer's war, Damascus not only transshipped Iranian weapons to Hizbullah, but also provided its own

top-of-the-line, Russian-made military equipment -- the Kornet anti-tank missile -- and its own 220mm anti-personnel rockets. Likewise, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, Syrian rearmament of Hezbollah continues unabated. On March 24, 2007, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1747 that specifically called on all states to refrain from the procurement of "any arms or related material" from Iran. The resolution was adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and thus constitutes binding international law. Nonetheless, Syria persisted in receiving Iranian weaponry and transferring these prohibited materials to Hezbollah.

On September 6, Syria fired anti-aircraft missiles at Israeli jets apparently conducting operations in Syrian airspace. Israel has generally been cautious about provoking Syria. In July 2006, after Syrian-backed Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers, sparking a war, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert went to great pains to assure Syrian President Bashar Assad that Israel would not attack.<sup>1</sup> According to Israeli military analysts, Israeli overflights of Syrian airspace are not a new phenomenon: Israel is said to routinely engage in intelligence collection operations in Syrian airspace. Yet only rarely does Israel do something threatening, such as buzzing Assad's summer palace in Latakia in June 2006 after Hamas, whose leadership is based in Damascus, seized Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

In contrast to Israel's generally cautious approach, the rhetoric emanating from Assad's Syria typically alternates between talk of war and peace. The message changes with little notice: in June 2007, a Syrian parliamentarian told Al Jazeera that Syria was "actively preparing for war."<sup>2</sup> Only a few weeks later, during his July speech to the Syrian parliament, Assad indicated that under the right circumstances he would enter into talks with Israel.<sup>3</sup>

#### The Shadow of the UN Investigation

However, Syrian peace negotiation trial balloons have been less than convincing. While Assad's comments generated a lot of attention in Israel and the West, a close look at the timing of these statements suggests these words of moderation most often were proffered at moments of maximum pressure on Syria -- frequently occurring just weeks prior to the release of UN status reports on the investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. For Assad, floating the idea of negotiations appears to be a tactic to deflect international pressure.

Objectively, the Syrian regime is under a lot of pressure. The UN is pursuing a comprehensive criminal investigation of the Hariri murder, which deeply angered the Saudi regime -- Hariri was a dual Lebanese-Saudi national and was close with the monarchy. The Investigation Commission's second report, issued in October 2005, implicated several members of Assad's inner circle, including the president's brother, intelligence chief Maher Assad, and brother-in-law and head of military intelligence, Asef Shawkat.<sup>4</sup> In March 2007, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1757, establishing a criminal court to prosecute the perpetrators of this crime.

The UN investigation and the international tribunal pose an existential threat to the Assad regime. Assad himself reportedly threatened UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon that he would "set the region on fire, from the Caspian to the Mediterranean" if the court was established.<sup>5</sup> With regime survival in the balance, erratic Syrian decision-making could increase the possibility of Israeli-Syrian conflict.

#### Syrian Support for Terrorism: Undermining Resolution 1701

Syria has sponsored terrorist organizations for decades. The Long Commission Report of the U.S. Department of Defense determined that Syria and Iran were involved in the October 1983 attack on the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut that killed 241 U.S. military personnel.<sup>6</sup> In 2001, a U.S. grand jury indictment from Alexandria, Virginia, pointed out that Saudi Hezbollah, which had been responsible for the 1996 Khobar Towers attack killing 19 U.S. Air Force personnel, also used Syrian territory for training; indeed, the planners of the attack met at the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine in Damascus.<sup>7</sup>

But the affiliation with Hamas and Hezbollah has deepened since Bashar Assad came to power in 2000. Last

summer's unprecedented declaration from Damascus of Hamas responsibility for the kidnapping of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit demonstrates just how far the relationship has come. In terms of operational and material support, however, the evolution of Damascus' relationship with Hizbullah is even more striking.

During last summer's war, it was revealed that Damascus had not only transshipped Iranian weapons to Hizbullah, but had also provided its own top-of-the-line, Russian-made military equipment -- the Kornet anti-tank missile -- and its own 220mm anti-personnel rockets to the Shiite terrorist organization. Both of these were used to great effect during Hizbullah's campaign. Likewise, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, Syrian rearmament of Hizbullah continues unabated. In June 2007, UN reporting on the implementation of Resolution 1701 cited "disturbing information" about the transport of rocket launchers from Syria to Hizbullah.<sup>8</sup> UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon characterized the shipment of rockets and mortars to Hizbullah that were seized by the Lebanese Army in the Bekaa Valley, as a "clear violation" of Resolution 1701.

Syrian policy flagrantly ignores UN Security Council resolutions in other ways. On March 24, 2007, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1747 that again called on Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment activities. Paragraph 5 of the resolution specifically called on all states to refrain from the procurement of "any arms or related material" from Iran. The resolution was adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and thus constitutes binding international law. Nonetheless, as noted, Syria persisted in receiving Iranian weaponry and transferring these prohibited materials to Hizbullah.

Assad himself has been effusive in his rhetorical support for regional "resistance," describing the tactic as "the alternative to restoring rights."<sup>9</sup> The Syrian regime was so taken with Hizbullah's performance during the 2006 war that it established its own organization called the "Popular Organization for the Liberation of the Golan."<sup>10</sup> By the end of July, this organization claimed to have detonated an IED targeting an IDF vehicle in the Israeli Golan.<sup>11</sup> In August, the organization issued a communique threatening to kidnap IDF soldiers on the Golan if Israel did not release Syrian prisoners captured 22 years ago.<sup>12</sup> In October, the newly established Syrian newspaper Golan Times reported the more dubious claim that this organization "prevented Israel from using smart bombs" in Lebanon.<sup>13</sup> The removal of Syrian military checkpoints along the Damascus-Qunietra road in August 2007 may heat up the "resistance" on this long, quiet border.

Less directly affecting Israel but nonetheless significant is the Syrian antipathy for the augmented UNIFIL (UN Interim Force in Lebanon) presence deployed in southern Lebanon by the Security Council after the Hizbullah-Israel war. As Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moualem told Der Spiegel in July 2006: "If the only purpose is to station troops on Lebanese territory to guarantee peace for Israel, then many Lebanese will see it as an occupation. That sort of arrangement reminds me very much of what happened in 1983 [when suicide bombers attacked the U.S. Marine base in Beirut, killing 241 people]....We don't want that to happen again."<sup>14</sup>

As of September 2007, UNIFIL troop contingents in Lebanon had already been attacked twice. The targeting of UNIFIL raises the specter of its withdrawal, which could lead to another round of Israel-Hizbullah fighting.

#### Syrian WMD Efforts

U.S. security agencies have been disturbed at Syria's involvement in developing weapons of mass destruction. At the Sixth Biological Weapons Convention Review Conference in November 2006, U.S. delegate John C. Rood, Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, specifically cited Syria -- along with Iran and North Korea -- as failing to comply with the Biological Weapons Convention.<sup>15</sup> Syria, according to the U.S. delegate, was engaged in research and development "for an offensive BW program."

Syrian chemical weapons have also been a problem. According to an unclassified report to Congress in the latter part of 2003 by the Central Intelligence Agency, Syria held a stockpile of Sarin nerve agent but was trying to develop

"more toxic and persistent nerve agents."<sup>16</sup> That same report already stated in 2003, "we are monitoring Syrian nuclear intentions with concern," despite the fact that Syria was a signatory to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and opened its declared nuclear research center to the full-scope safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency. In the aftermath of Israel's air operation over Syria, Dr. Andrew Semmel, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy and Negotiations, warned that Syria might have a number of "secret suppliers" for a covert nuclear program.<sup>17</sup>

#### Preparing for War

Continued support for terrorism and provocative rhetoric provide some insight into the regime's disposition toward Israel. More telling, however, is what has been described by senior IDF officials as an "unprecedented military buildup" in Syria.<sup>18</sup> This buildup has been made possible through the largess of Tehran, which by some reports, in effect, repaid Syria's \$15 billion debt to Moscow, thus freeing up Damascus to reengage in military procurement.<sup>19</sup> Iran also appears to be helping Syria pay for the new purchases. According to Israeli Military Intelligence Research Head Brig.-Gen. Yossi Baidatz, as of June 2007, Syria was "accelerating military acquisition."<sup>20</sup>

Topping the list of recent Syrian procurements from Russia are advanced air defense and anti-tank guided weapons systems. Of these armaments, the Pantsyr-SIE short-range gun and missile defense system has received the most attention. The \$730 million Pantsyr deal involves the sale of 50 units to Syria (of which 10 will be re-transferred to Iran).<sup>21</sup> Delivery is slated to start by the end of 2007, although some analysts believe Syria may have already received some of this equipment. Syria is also said to have received an influx of Kornet anti-tank systems, which Hizbullah used to great effect against Israeli armor in 2006.<sup>22</sup>

Syria's battlefield preparations seem to be inspired by Hizbullah's self-described "divine victory" over Israel. Not only is the Syrian military accelerating training for its troops, according to IDF sources, the training is focused on "guerilla tactics utilized by Hizbullah," including urban and guerilla warfare training. Of course, Syrian reliance on commando forces armed with anti-tank missiles targeting advancing armor is not a particularly new Syrian tactic, but press reports suggest that Damascus now has more confidence in this tactic, which threatens to lead toward miscalculation.

In the same vein, Israeli military intelligence sources recently noted that Syria is engaged in an accelerated deployment of Katyusha and Scud missiles -- with 500-kilogram warheads.<sup>23</sup> Syria is reported to have thousands of rockets with ranges of up to 56 miles positioned along Syria's southern border with Israel, while other Syrian assets -- longer-range missiles armed with chemical warheads -- are believed to be positioned further from the border. This Syrian shift toward adding short-range tactical missiles and rockets takes a page from the Hizbullah playbook. As Yiftah Shapir from the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University said, "Syria was impressed by Hizbullah's strategic success, with its use of small rockets and Israel's inability to neutralize them."<sup>24</sup>

#### Syrian Involvement in the Iraqi Insurgency

During his testimony to Congress on September 10, 2007, General David H. Petraeus, the U.S. commander in Iraq, presented maps illustrating Syria's pivotal role as the source of foreign fighters entering Iraq. One of his maps showed three arrows that illustrated infiltration routes from Syria into Iraq; they were labeled "Foreign Fighter Flow." A week earlier, in an interview with al-Watan al-Arabi, Petraeus described how Syria allows thousands of these insurgents to arrive at Damascus International Airport and then cross the Iraqi border. These foreign fighters, he explained, supplied the main manpower pool for the majority of suicide bombings in Iraq.

Indeed, over the last month coalition forces have reported how various captured insurgents have revealed Syria's direct role in Iraq. On September 3, a detainee having financial ties with Syrian intelligence was taken into custody.<sup>25</sup> In March 2007, U.S. Central Command revealed that a "Saddam Fedayeen leader involved in setting up

training camps in Syria for Iraqi and foreign fighters" was arrested in Mosul.<sup>26</sup> Earlier, coalition forces imprisoned an insurgent who recruited Iraqi snipers for training in Syria.<sup>27</sup> Lately, there has been a reported drop in the number of insurgents crossing over from Syria to Iraq, but it is still premature to attribute this to a change in Syrian policy.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Syria not only plays a destabilizing role with respect to Israel, but with respect to Iraq as well.

## Conclusion

Syria's recent acquisitions, deployment of tactical assets, and its menacing troop posture in the Golan Heights represent a continued threat to Israel. Days after the reported Israeli overflight incident of September 6, Syrian officials continued to hold out the possibility of a military response. For the time being, however, it appears that the overflight crisis will not escalate. Still, the broader question of Assad's intentions remains.

Speculation abounds as to why Syria is pressing for a spike in tensions with Israel. A few analysts believe Syria is upping the ante in an effort to coerce greater Western diplomatic involvement in peace negotiations. Still others suggest that the Syrian buildup might be a prelude to a Yom Kippur War-type military campaign, with a limited strike against Israel designed to change the status quo on the Golan and provoke Western diplomatic intervention. It is even possible that Damascus is raising tensions to rally Arab public support and mitigate its ongoing diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia.

At the end of the day, the real danger for Israel is that both war and peace would likely serve the overriding Syrian priority of insulating the Assad regime from the consequences of being implicated in the Hariri murder. Even if Syria lost a war, Israel would be loathe to dislodge the regime, fearing that Islamists might replace the ruling Alawi clique. The regime would survive and most likely dodge the bullet of UN sanctions on Hariri. In the unlikely event of peace, there is little doubt that in addition to the Golan, the sine qua non for Damascus would be the end of any criminal tribunal in the Hariri case.

Given the pressures on the Assad regime, tensions along the Israeli-Syrian border are sure to continue. As long as Damascus pursues its proxy war, the Israeli government will rightly view developments on the ground in Syria as threatening. While the Syrians no doubt view the September Israeli overflight as a provocation, the government of Israel has taken deliberate public steps to de-escalate tensions. But this might not be enough. If Assad continues to play with fire, a Syrian conflagration with Israel may result.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 2002 to 2006, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as country director for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. He is a member of the Board of Advisers of the Institute for Contemporary Affairs at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

## Notes

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