

Syria, Hamas, and the Gaza Crisis

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Brief Analysis

Earlier today, Hamas politburo chief Khaled Mashal held a press conference in Damascus broadcast live on al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya, and Syrian state television. During the broadcast, Mashal described kidnapped Israeli soldier Cpl. Gilad Shalit as a “prisoner of war,” said that prisoner exchange was the only solution to the crisis, and appeared to recommend direct negotiations between Israel and Hamas. The press conference was significant, not only for its content, but because it was held in a Damascus hotel: typically in the past, when Syria-based terrorist organizations took responsibility for operations, they did so from Beirut. The high profile Mashal statement from Damascus suggests that the Asad regime has changed its rules of engagement from tacit to explicit support for Hamas. The shift highlights Syria’s emboldened foreign policy a year and a half after the assassination in Beirut of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Background

Syria was a charter member of the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism in December 1979. Although not directly implicated in terrorism since 1986, Syria has nevertheless maintained its status on the State Department list, in part by virtue of allowing terrorist organizations sanctuary in Syrian territory. For decades this policy was a constant irritant in the U.S.-Syrian bilateral relationship, but it has become a more central problem after Hamas relocated its headquarters to Damascus in the late 1990s following its expulsion from Jordan.

In April 2003, then Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus and discussed the issue of terrorist sanctuary with President Bashar al-Asad. Powell emerged from the three-hour meeting with a pledge from Asad to close down the offices and restrict the communications of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). As with Asad’s earlier pledge to Powell regarding closing down the Iraqi oil pipeline, however, the promise was not fulfilled.

Five months later, in August 2003, PIJ perpetrated a suicide bomb attack on a Jerusalem bus, killing twenty-three. Responding to the attack, Israeli jets overflew Asad’s summer palace in Latakia. (The Syrian president was not at home at the time.) Then, two months later, PIJ perpetrated another suicide operation, this time killing nineteen at a restaurant in Haifa. In response to this attack, Israel bombed Ein Sahav, a terrorist training camp about ten miles outside of Damascus. According to Israeli officials, Syria understood the message conveyed by these military actions,

and subsequently ordered the locally based terrorist groups to take a lower profile. At least temporarily, the groups started issuing statements from Beirut, and the pace of Hizballah operations against Israel slowed as well.

Syria Steadfast

Responding to the June 25, 2006, kidnapping of Corporal Shalit, on June 28 four Israeli F-16 fighter jets “buzzed” Asad’s Latakia home. Unlike 1998, when Turkey successfully compelled then President Hafiz al-Asad to deport Kurdish terrorist leader Abdullah Ocalan, Israeli efforts to convince Bashar to jettison Mashal or otherwise pressure Hamas to resolve the Shalit crisis do not stand a good chance of success. This is at least in part because Syria today is more confident than at any time since the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Bashar was apparently in residence at the time of the latest flyby and privy to the sonic booms and shattered glass that accompanied the flight. Nevertheless, the regime was not shaken by the incident. Indeed, Syria’s only public response was to register an official complaint with the UN Security Council regarding the airspace violation. The June 29 headlines of the Syrian daily al-Baath made no mention of the palace overflight and instead reported, “Our air defenses challenged the two Israeli planes trying to infiltrate near our shores.”

Although the Syrian government still suffers domestically and internationally from the fallout of the Cedar Revolution—in particular, the widespread perception that Syria was involved in the Hariri murder—the Asad regime has emerged unscathed if not emboldened one year after its withdrawal from Lebanon.

Indeed, despite early signs that the UN investigation into the Hariri assassination would implicate Syria, to date, the Asad regime has largely escaped sanction. Inconclusive UN reports have given the regime a sense of security and a renewed confidence. Some economic sanctions to isolate Syria are in place, but the economy does not seem to be getting worse. To the contrary, Syria’s growth rate last year was reportedly a respectable 5.5 percent, due to extensive investment from the Gulf states and income from high oil prices (Syria is a modest oil exporter). Syria has also grown closer to Iran. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinijad visited Damascus in January 2006; in February, Iran and Syria announced they would “unite” to counter mutual challenges.

Syria’s renewed confidence is reflected in its policies. On Lebanon, the regime continues to hold tight to possession of Shebaa Farms, in spite of some Lebanese requests for UN adjudication in hopes of returning the disputed land to Lebanese sovereignty. At the same time, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, Syria remains cold to the idea of “normalizing” relations with Lebanon. Asad continues to avoid meeting Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora; in April, in a calculated slight, he dispatched Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command terrorist warhorse Ahmed Jibril to Beirut as his personal envoy. Syrian support for Hizballah likewise remains unchanged. In March 2006, a shipment of twelve truckloads of Iranian weapons was delivered to Hizballah via Syria. On Iraq, too, Syrian policy remains problematic. Aside from some cosmetic changes, Syria remains a key node for jihadists transiting to Iraq. The regime also continues to provide sanctuary for several Palestinian terrorist organizations in addition to Hamas.

The emboldened Syrian regime does face some challenges at home and abroad, but has taken steps to insulate itself from danger. Internally, Asad has cracked down severely on dissidents, arresting civil society activists, critics of the regime, and advocates of reform. Externally, the December 2005 defection of former Syrian vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam and the subsequent establishment of the National Solidarity Front (NSF) caused Asad some temporary concern: the group—an alliance between a former Baathist and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood—appears to have support within Syria. Despite making some initial waves, however, the NSF appears to be facing some unity problems. In terms of the external opposition, the regime benefits from the fact that the vast majority of Syrians—who hate the regime—also oppose foreign intervention.

Conclusion

Renewed focus on Syria’s provision of sanctuary to terrorist organizations is important and long overdue. Indeed, in recent years, this particular Syrian transgression had become a second-tier priority in U.S.-Syrian relations—behind Syrian support for the Iraqi insurgency, support for Hizballah, and meddling in Lebanon. Israel’s violation of Syrian airspace on June 28 focused attention on Syria’s responsibility for the kidnapping of Corporal Shalit. The Bush administration echoed this point on June 30, when U.S. ambassador to the UN John Bolton requested that Syria “arrest Mashal . . . and close down the various terrorist headquarters in Damascus.”

In the two weeks since the kidnapping, Asad has offered himself as a mediator, alternately talking with the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Turks in a tactic apparently designed to burnish Syria’s tarnished international image. The result of Asad’s maneuvering, of course, has been to invite international and specifically U.S. engagement in the crisis sparked by Syrian support for terrorism. Washington should avoid taking the bait and refrain from offering engagement and incentives for continued Syrian bad behavior. A better approach would be to more actively punish Syrian support for terror.

In this regard, Asad’s apparent shift from provision of sanctuary to overt support for Hamas provides an opportunity to focus international pressure on the unhelpful Syrian role in Palestinian affairs. As with the UN-led international effort to support Lebanon, Washington should capitalize on the Gaza crisis to focus the international community on the dangers sparked by Damascus’s support for Hamas terrorism. Another Security Council resolution—accompanied by international sanctions against Damascus for harboring terrorists—would be a good start for upping the pressure on the Asad regime. A package of antiterrorism sanctions that negatively impacts the robust Syrian-EU trade relationship could provide effective leverage on Syria.

At his press conference this morning, Mashal was effusive in his praise of Syria and its regime. “Syria is rejecting pressure,” he said, “because it knows that it is right.” Should the international community act to increase the costs for Asad, Damascus may think twice about rejecting this pressure.

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