

Iran and Syria:

State Sponsorship in the Age of Terror Networks

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The age of “network terrorism” results from the loosely affiliated networks that, taken together, form the potent international terrorist threat that challenges Western civilization today. Such networks are built on the interpersonal relationships between individual cell members, and are increasingly funded and supported by individual wealthy donors, front companies and charities. Despite the state still being a dominant terrorist sponsor, state sponsorship of international terrorism has to a large extent declined with the rise of these loosely affiliated networks.

In fact, the phenomenon of network terrorism has grown in tandem with a sharp increase in state sponsorship of terrorism—not only by traditional full-fledged state sponsors such as Syria and Iran, but also by states that facilitate terrorism.

State sponsorship is a technical term; a group is either on the State Department’s “state sponsor” list or it is not. Yet many countries—among them Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Lebanon, and at times the “proto-state” Palestinian Authority—are unfortunately doing their share to make sure that terrorism continues, post-September 11.

In this regard, the issue of the lack of a fixed definition for terrorism is a serious one, and it is certainly the largest stumbling block in international cooperation concerning the issue. There is, however, a very straightforward yardstick that should be applied: no cause, however legitimate, justifies the intentional killing of innocent civilians. This basic concept should be a relatively safe definition by any human standards.

Despite the real and significant shift toward sub-state sponsorship of terrorism, Iran and Syria are, respectively, the worlds' foremost state sponsors on international terror.

Despite its continued sponsorship of international terrorist groups, most notably Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Syria did provide the United States with intelligence assistance early on in the war on terror. For example, U.S. intelligence assisted in the apprehension of Mohammed Zamar, the recruiter for the al-Qaeda cell in Hamburg and a wanted leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and arranged for his arrival in Damascus. (It should be noted that an entire echelon within al Qaeda's senior leadership consists of graduates of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, including many members of the al Qaeda cell in Madrid.)

In Damascus, Syrian interrogation of Zamar provided U.S. intelligence services with valuable and timely information. Information that the Syrians gleaned from Zamar and forwarded to U.S. authorities is believed to have thwarted at least one attack targeting U.S. forces in Bahrain. Nevertheless, direct access was never granted to Mohammed Zamar, and other information he divulged remains unknown. It could be safely assumed that the Syrians did not pass on information that reflected poorly on them in any way.

The cooperation of Syria's leadership in providing intelligence information to the U.S did not signal a sudden abhorrence for acts of terror, however. Rather, it was a temporary, tactical confluence of mutual interests. Syria is ruled by an Alawite minority that is particularly wary of Sunni extremists. As such, Damascus was more than willing to share intelligence on the many al Qaeda operatives that grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood.

On the two occasions that Secretary of State Colin Powell was sent to Syria, he received promises from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and on both counts those promises have been broken.

The first promise, made during the Secretary's February 26, 2001, visit, was that Syria would cease pumping illicit oil from Iraq, which Damascus did in violation of several UN Security Council resolutions, even as it sat on the Security Council. The illegal pipeline was believed to be bringing Iraq and Syria each \$1.1 billion in revenue annually. The pipeline did shut down, for approximately a week and a half, and promptly opened again.

The Secretary of State was sent back in April 2002, and demanded that the Syrians do more to crack down on Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and other terrorist groups operating in Syria and Syrian-controlled Lebanon. Currently, a total of seven of the foreign terrorist organizations on the State Department's terrorism list are headquartered in Damascus.

Again, assurances were given, but then, very openly, senior members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP and the PFLP-GC instructed journalists they were removing the brass plaques on their doors, and were no longer granting interviews in Damascus. Henceforth, interviews would be granted in Lebanon only. According to U.S. intelligence, all these groups continued operating in Damascus; only the press interviews were cut back.

Meanwhile, Syrian ophthalmologist-turned-President Bashar al-Assad has demonstrated particularly short-sighted decisionmaking, including engaging in activities and relationships his more strategic father never did. For example, the younger Assad has developed an extremely close relationship with Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah with whom he meets regularly. As the head of Hezbollah, Nasrallah is not just responsible for terrorist attacks against Israel. He runs an organization that—until al-Qaeda—was responsible for the deaths of more Americans than any other terrorist group.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Hezbollah's global presence is greater now than it ever has been. It's capability to conduct attacks internationally against Western targets and Israel has expanded to unprecedented levels. This assessment is derived not only from American and Israeli information, but from the Filipinos, Chileans and numerous others as well.

Bashar al-Assad, has taken greater steps than his father to sponsor terrorist activities. An example of this is the fact that Syria not only allows Iran to transship weapons and materiel to Hezbollah via the Damascus airport, it has even been providing Hezbollah with Syrian weaponry—including Syrian missiles. While the exact number is up for debate, some figures indicate that as many as 10,000 have been delivered to date.

Syria continues to serve as a major training ground for terrorists serving as the headquarters of several terrorist groups. The training of terrorists does not simply take place on Syrian soil; there is an active level of complicity between Syrian officials and terrorist organizations. Terrorists are met at the Jordanian-Syrian border by Syrian officials, who check their documents without stamping them and literally escort them to Damascus for training, primarily at training camps run by Ahmad Jibril's PFLP-GC. Members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, renegade

Fatah Tanzim, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad have all been escorted through Jordan into Syria. Ziad Nafa, a former PFLP-GC operative, told a Jordanian court in February of 2002 that one of the thirteen suspects then on trial for plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in Amman had asked him to arrange for the group to be trained for that mission in Syria.

This is a type of state sponsorship that is no less important than paying the bill outright. (Syria does not have a lot of money right now—which is a point of leverage that the U.S. government could be using to pressure Syria to cease its sponsoring of terrorism.) A few days later, the officials escort the terrorists to the PFLP-GC camp and stay to make sure that they are properly cared for, and then accompany them back to the Jordanian border.

Events in Iraq provide the latest example of Syrian assistance and complicity in nurturing and exporting terrorism. On 27 September 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority reported that of the 248 fighters then being held, at least 19 were identified al-Qaeda operatives. Of the 248, 123 came from Syria. The next largest numbers came from Iran and Yemen. It is not just their point of origin that is significant; to quote one terrorist operative who gave an interview to a British journalist: “Our entire group was trained in Syria.”

Some of the jihadis caught by Coalition authorities have been found with travel documents issued in Syria. Buses that have been captured crossing over from Syria—and, in one case, destroyed by rockets—have been found to contain suicide bomber belts, large amounts of money, and letters outlining the financial reward to be earned for killing a regular GI, a Colonel, or a General respectively.

The misconception exists that unless there is an al-Qaeda connection behind an attack, it does not constitute terrorism. Reality does not reflect this claim. There are numerous examples of crossover between different groups. Groups that do not cooperate operationally, like al-Qaeda and Hamas, still have logistical and financial links in Europe and elsewhere. This was the case with Bank al-Taqwa, the International Islamic Relief Organization, and people like Sheik Muaydi, the head of the al Aqsa International Foundation in Yemen.

It is possible to establish a link between Syria and al-Qaeda. In April 2003, Italian authorities broke up a ring of al-Qaeda affiliates who were recruiting Muslims and radicalizing them there. Their commanders were two individuals in Syria, who are widely believed by the intelligence community to have been there with the knowledge of the Syrian government. Terrorist activities cannot be pursued without the knowledge of the Syrian authorities; being an undemocratic country, activism of any kind is closely monitored there. Thus it is not inconceivable that al-Qaeda affiliates along with their commanders operated with the consent of the Syrian authorities. Before the war in Iraq, the two commanders in Syria facilitated the movement of these recruits, via Aleppo, into the Ansar al-Islam enclave in Northern Iraq.

Many jihadis made their way into northern Iraq by way of this system. The Los Angeles Times reported some of the telephone intercepts made by the Italians. In one conversation, the commanders in Syria told their lieutenants in Europe how to go about evading the counterterrorism environment that has been set in place there. Suggested tactics employed to evade surveillance by the authorities included meeting on the sidelines of the EU and regularly changing cell phones, not just the batteries. At one point, towards the end of the conversation from the same wiretap, the commander reassured his lieutenants in Italy saying, “There is one thing that I don't want you to worry about. Saudi Arabia's money is your money.”

Syria, however, plays second fiddle to Iran when it came to international terrorism. Iran is annually designated by the CIA as the most frenetic state sponsor of terrorism. According to the U.S. intelligence community, that state sponsorship has not decreased since 9/11. Rather, it has increased significantly.

As a reward for its contributions to the ongoing intifada, Iran not only increased Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) budget by 75 percent, it broke that budget out from the budget of Hezbollah. Traditionally, Iran would funnel money

to Hezbollah—to the tune of approximately \$100 million a year. Part of that budget would be earmarked for Hamas and part of it for Islamic Jihad and others. As a reward to Islamic Jihad for the fact that it was the first Palestinian terrorist organization to transform the intifada from a stonethrowing uprising into a terror war, the group received a significant increase in its budget.

Iran has other means to sustain and invigorate the intifada. What is essentially a local indigenous conflict is being funded and armed by outside elements. Were it not for Iran sponsoring terrorism, a more stable and peaceful environment would exist in the region.

At the very beginning of the intifada, the Iranians began to do something they had never done before. They started to take Palestinians moderately wounded in the intifada to Iran, via Jordan, for medical treatment—which would take longer than medically necessary. They would only take the moderately wounded so that once those people recuperated from their wounds, they could undergo ideological indoctrination and a brief stint at terror training camps. These individuals were also granted a position of prestige; they were personally introduced to people like Hamas' Khaled Mishaal and Hezbollah's Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah. They were then sent back to the West Bank to recruit others, to conduct surveillance, and to plan and carry out attacks.

Hezbollah now has a foothold in the northern West Bank through a group that goes by the name of Khattab al-Awda (the “Return Brigades”). Both Israeli and U.S. authorities have documented the number of attacks that this faction has carried out on behalf of Hezbollah. Even if Israel was capable of obtaining a ceasefire with groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad—and even if the Palestinian Authority could bring all these local groups under control—Iran now has a new proxy, and would continue to be able to facilitate attacks in the event of a ceasefire.

Several of the most senior wanted al-Qaeda operatives are now resident in Iran, purportedly under house arrest, although shielded from Western intelligence. It has been known for some time that Saif al-Adel is in Iran. The Saudis are reportedly extremely irked that Iran is only handing over low-level operatives. Saif al-Adel, along with Saad Bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and others, are being shielded from the proper authorities. Saudi anger is fuelled by the May 12th bombings, which are now strongly suspected to be in part coordinated by Saif al-Adel and others in Iran, where they were ostensibly under house arrest at the time.

Further, it is also known that while they were under “house arrest” in the eastern part of the country, near Afghanistan, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was in western Iran. Zarqawi and his Tawhid network in Germany were recently designated by the Treasury Department as “Specially Designated Global Terrorist Entities,” and for good reason. The Tawhid network was procuring false documents for the purpose of exfiltrating Taliban and al-Qaeda fugitives from the region into Europe. When the German authorities cracked down on the Tawhid network, they were at an initial stage of planning terrorist attacks in Germany.

Zarqawi's network has been tied to the ricin plot that was uncovered on 5 January 2003 in London. Further details have emerged about the al-Qaeda sponsored terrorist attacks that Zarqawi's network was responsible for executing in Israel. Zarqawi's network was also responsible for engaging in terrorist activities in Turkey. Zarqawi maintains close links with the Ansar Al-Islam elements in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq.

Several terrorist threats have been thwarted because of information found in safe houses which are known to have been in direct contact with al-Qaeda personnel in Iran. Saif al-Adel, Saad Bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi along with others, were in Iran and therefore tied, in some way or another, to the bombings in Riyadh. There were apparently al-Qaeda plots to assassinate members of the Saudi royal family, at least two plots targeting Saudi ministries, and now it has been discovered—in the safe houses in Saudi Arabia—that they were using the country as a base to plot many more attacks.

None of this is new. In the period leading up to the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, ten percent of Osama Bin

Laden's satellite phone calls were made to Iran. From the testimony of Ali Mohammed and other captured al-Qaeda operatives, meetings were known to be periodically set up by Iran and al-Qaeda.

It is to the detriment to the national security of the U.S. and her allies that these issues were not dealt with before. The mistakes that are now being made regarding Hezbollah are the same as those made a decade ago concerning al-Qaeda. Security services are not cracking down forcefully, and not paying attention to the terrorist cells and networks that are being established internationally right under the respective authorities' noses. And there is nobody that sponsors Hezbollah more than Syria and Iran.

Hezbollah's activities in Lebanon, Syria and in northern Israel are intimately tied to Syrian foreign policy.

Hezbollah's international activities, for example the two bombings carried out in Argentina, the bombing of the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia, the failed attempt to blow up the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok in 1994, and at least seven plots among others targeting the United States over the past decade, are all very closely tied to Iran.

Despite the evolution of the threat of international terrorism, and the dominance of the network model of terrorist organizations and supporters, state sponsors of terror remain key nodes in this matrix. Greater attention must be paid to the threats posed by state sponsors, including both those on the State Department's list and others not on the list but sponsoring terror nonetheless. ❖

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