

Terror from Damascus (Part II): Hizballah and al-Qaeda Terrorist Activity in Syria

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Colin Powell's recent talks in Damascus focused not only on Syrian sponsorship of Palestinian terrorist groups, but also on Syria's increasingly intimate ties with and support for Hizballah. Yet, Syrian support for terrorist groups of global reach does not end with Hizballah. Recently revealed intelligence on al-Qaeda activities in Europe exposed a significant al-Qaeda network in Syria.

Al-Qaeda in Syria

Even as Damascus provided intelligence that prevented a terrorist attack on the U.S. Navy's Administrative Support Unit in Bahrain, President Bashar al-Asad's tightly run police state both increased its support for groups like Hizballah and tolerated al-Qaeda's use of Syrian territory as a base of operations. Indeed, in early April, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage commented that Syrian help regarding al-Qaeda "has lately ebbed." Last week, Cofer Black, the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, seconded this assessment, acknowledging, "We clearly don't have the full support of the Syrian government on the Al-Qaeda problem. They have allowed Al-Qaeda personnel to come in and virtually settle in Syria with their knowledge and their support."

Moreover, according to Italian prosecutors, "Syria has functioned as a hub for an al Qaida network" linked to prominent al-Qaeda operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Transcripts of operatives' conversations "paint a detailed picture of overseers in Syria coordinating the movement of recruits and money" between cells in Europe and Ansar al-Islam training camps in northern Iraq. The cell being prosecuted in Italy is accused of sending about forty al-Qaeda recruits to Ansar camps via Syria in an effort to create a post-Afghanistan base of operations for al-Qaeda. The cell's leaders in Syria facilitated the recruits' travel and provided their funding, while the European members gave false travel documents to recruits and fugitives and monitored their travel. At least some of the recruits traveling to the Ansar camps stayed at the Ragdan Hotel in Aleppo for some time and later stopped in Damascus. Indeed, the Italian investigation revealed that al-Qaeda operatives in Europe were acting at the instruction of superiors in and around Damascus and Aleppo, including "Mullah Fuad" (described as the "gatekeeper in Syria for volunteers intent on reaching Iraq"), "Abdullah," and "Abderrazak." For example, in one conversation, an operative assures a comrade that sending money via Fuad is safe, saying, "I have sent so many transfers to Mullah Fuad and they always got there,

no problem." In another conversation, a senior operative assures his subordinate about funding, saying, "Don't ever worry about money, because Saudi Arabia's money is your money."

Apparently, Syria-based commanders such as Fuad are important al-Qaeda lieutenants. In one wiretapped conversation, the European cell members, seven of whom were recently arrested, described Fuad and Abderrazak as "wanted fugitives" and referred to them as "the boss" and "Shaykh," respectively. Moreover, one of their associates arrested in Italy—a Somali—is suspected of funding the November 2002 al-Qaeda attack on Israeli tourists in Mombassa, Kenya, while another associate—a Moroccan—is an accused forger and admitted associate of members of the Hamburg cell connected with the September 11 attacks. Italian authorities suspect Abderrazak may be tied to the Hamburg cell as well.

Hizballah in Syria and Lebanon

Since Asad inherited the presidency from his father, Hizballah has moved energetically into the Palestinian arena, both by sending its own operatives to attempt terrorist attacks inside Israel and by establishing links with terrorist groups in the West Bank, Gaza, and among Israeli Arabs. For example, in June 2002, Israeli authorities conducting a search in Hebron arrested a Hizballah operative who had entered the area on a Canadian passport. The arrest coincided with the discovery in Hebron of mines previously used only by Hizballah in Lebanon. In July 2002, Israeli authorities arrested Hussein Ali al-Khatib and Hatem Ahmad al-Khatib, two Syrians from the Golan Heights who, in addition to smuggling weapons and drugs, were spying on Israel and passing classified information to Hizballah contacts.

Hizballah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are more active in Syrian-controlled Lebanon than ever. Their activities have included recruiting, training, and dispatching a cell of Palestinians that killed seven Israelis in a cross-border raid on the northern Israeli community of Metsuba in March 2002. According to senior U.S. officials, Hizballah leader Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah and Imad Mughniyeh are working together in planning terrorist attacks globally and across the UN-certified blue line separating Israel and Lebanon. Asked if Syria would now allow Lebanon to "trace and hand over" Mughniyeh—who is prominently listed on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "most wanted terrorist" list—to U.S. authorities, Syrian spokeswoman Buthaina Shaaban recently responded, "I don't think this is the issue of the moment."

In a sharp break from the caution exercised by his father, Bashar al-Asad is reported to have integrated elements of Hizballah's paramilitary units into the Syrian army in Lebanon and has in fact supplied the group with heavy arms of its own (in addition to Iranian arms transshipped via Damascus), including a new 220-millimeter rocket. Indeed, with Syria's blessing, Hizballah has deployed some 10,000 rockets in southern Lebanon—all either supplied by Syria or transferred from Iran via Syria—with ranges capable of reaching major Israeli population centers.

Hizballah, al-Qaeda, and Training Camps

In June 2002, U.S. and European intelligence officials described Hizballah as "increasingly teaming up with al-Qaeda on logistics and training for terrorist operations." This alliance, described as "ad hoc," "tactical," and "informal," was said to involve mid- and low-level operatives. By September 2002, officials were describing this partnership as "the most worrisome" of al-Qaeda's new tactical alliances. For example, al-Qaeda operative al-Zarqawi is known to have traveled from Baghdad to Syria and Lebanon, meeting with leaders from Hizballah and other extremists in southern Lebanon. Mohammad Zouaydi, the Syrian in charge of a key al-Qaeda cell in Madrid, sent some of the European Muslims recruited by his cell to terror training camps in Lebanon. Indeed, following their defeat in Afghanistan, several al-Qaeda operatives have been caught trying to set up "bases" for receiving al-Qaeda fugitives in Lebanon. Lebanese authorities captured two Lebanese and a Saudi setting up such bases in September 2002 and convicted another eight al-Qaeda operatives—an Australian, five Lebanese, a Saudi, and a Palestinian—on similar charges just

this month.

Speaking aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, President George W. Bush recently highlighted the destruction of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan as a critical victory in the war on terror. Currently, Syria and Lebanon host the greatest concentration of such camps, with Iran a close second. Camps for Hizballah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command dot the Syrian and Lebanese landscapes, where Hizballah and Iranian trainers have schooled a motley crew of Palestinian, Kurdish, Armenian, and other recruits in a variety of terrorist and intelligence tactics. For example, several of the terrorists who carried out the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing were recruited in Syria and trained in Hizballah camps in Lebanon and Iran.

Conclusion

In a recent letter to the White House, Senator John Kerry noted that "Syria and Lebanon have for years funded terrorists and provided a safe haven for terrorists' blood money." Syrian sponsorship of terror is not limited to Palestinian groups targeting Israel; it includes proactive support for Hizballah and a safe haven for al-Qaeda. Having altered the regional strategic environment, the United States and its allies must now leverage the liberation of Iraq for further successes in the war on terror, beginning with Syria.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow in terrorism studies at The Washington Institute.

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