

# Confronting Syrian Support for Terrorist Groups

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Articles & Testimony

**A**fter the unveiling of an American backed Israeli-Palestinian plan known as the road map earlier this month, US Secretary of State Colin Powell embarked on a trip to the Middle East. Significantly, however, he did not stop in Israel or the West Bank on this trip, but went straight to Damascus to warn Syrian President Bashar Assad "in the strongest possible terms" that the United States will not tolerate his government's continued sponsorship of terrorist organizations that have carried out scores of suicide bombings in Israel during the past two and a half years.[1] As one member of Powell's entourage put it, "we didn't come here bearing carrots." [2]

This display of American resolve -- the true test of which will come in the weeks and months ahead -- stems partly from the recognition that the peace process cannot be revitalized as long as Syrian sponsorship of Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), and other terrorist groups continues unabated. Unlike in the past, however, the United States is not demanding that Syria merely "rein in" terrorist groups opposed to the peace process, but that it end its involvement in terrorism completely. In light of the Assad regime's sponsorship of terror attacks against US troops in Iraq and new intelligence regarding al-Qaeda's network in Syria, American officials are not likely to tolerate anything short of Syria getting out of the terror game altogether.

## Syrian Meddling in Iraq

The war in Iraq highlighted Syria's status as a state sponsor of terror bent on frustrating US efforts to bring peace, security and democratization to the Middle East. Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara asserted quite plainly, "Syria's interest is to see the invaders defeated in Iraq." [3] He added, "The resistance of the Iraqis is extremely important. It is a heroic resistance to the US-British occupation of their country." [4]

Taking Shara's position one step further, Syria's senior mufti called for suicide attacks on American soldiers in Iraq. [5] Indeed, thousands of Arab irregular forces -- some volunteers, some members of terrorist groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Fatah splinter groups -- crossed the Syrian border into Iraq to battle coalition forces. Coalition commanders commonly referred to these irregulars as "Syrians" because most of them were Syrian, and most of those who weren't carried Syrian travel documents, in some cases specifically marked "reason for entry: Jihad. Length of stay: Indefinite." [6] In one case, US military forces captured a large group of Syrians and confiscated seventy suicide jackets -- each filled with twenty-two pounds of military grade C4 explosives, and mercury

detonators.[7] In another case, soldiers found "several hundred thousands dollars" on a bus that came from Syria, together with "leaflets suggesting that Iraqis would be rewarded if they killed Americans." [8]

### Palestinian Terrorists in Syria

The most significant Palestinian terrorist groups enjoying the safe harbor and sponsorship of the Syrian government are Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP-GC. These groups maintain offices in both Damascus and the adjacent Yarmouk refugee camp, including at least two Hamas offices, one PIJ office, and five PFLP-GC offices. Smaller Palestinian groups run at least eleven other offices in the Syrian capital.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Syrian officials continue to describe the Damascus headquarters of these terrorist groups as "media offices." In fact, their activities, include inciting, recruiting, training, coordinating, funding, and directing terrorists operating in Israel and the Palestinian-controlled territories.

### Hamas

From their Syrian safe haven, Hamas leaders Khaled Mishal, Mousa Abu Marzouk (whom the US government has named a Specially Designated Terrorist), Imad al-Alami, and others actively launch terrorist operations. Indeed, according to early intelligence assessments, Asif Mohammed Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif, the British suicide bombers who struck Tel Aviv last week, were recruited, trained, and sent on their mission by al-Alami in Damascus. [9] This intelligence further suggests that the two "were led by a Hamas or Hezbollah guide through Jordan to the Allenby Bridge crossing into the West Bank." [10] Such activity is not unusual. Since Bashar Assad took office in mid-2000, Israeli authorities have uncovered more than twenty Hamas activists who were recruited in various Arab countries and sent to Syria for terrorist training. [11] The recruits received weapons training as well as lessons in intelligence activities, hostage taking, suicide operations, and the preparation of explosives. Moreover, Syrian officials have themselves urged Hamas and other groups to step up attacks. In May 2002, for example, Damascus reportedly offered Hamas direct financial aid if it revived its tactic of suicide bombings. [12]

Hamas leaders have acknowledged the central role that their group's Damascus-based "political" leaders play in operational decision making. Hamas military commander Salah Shehade asserted that "the political apparatus is sovereign over the military apparatus, and a decision of the political [echelon] takes precedence over the decision of the military [echelon], without intervening in military operations." [13]

### Islamic Jihad; Ramadan Abdullah Shallah

Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Abdullah Shallah operates out of Damascus with impunity, along with deputies such as Ziad Nakhala. Documents seized by Israeli forces revealed that Shallah sent Bassam al-Saadi, the Islamic Jihad official in charge of finances in Jenin, \$127,000 to "aid the families of those killed or arrested." [14] In fact, the flow of money from Damascus to Jenin was so massive that Islamic Jihad eventually began funding operations by other groups. An internal document from the Palestinian Authority (PA) General Intelligence agency noted that Islamic Jihad "pays the expense of most of the activities that Fatah carries out. Additionally, the [Islamic] Jihad movement is adopting the [families of the] killed Fatah activists." [15]

One of Shallah's deputies, Akram Ajuri, supervises Islamic Jihad terrorist activities in the West Bank from Damascus, maintaining direct contact with West Bank operatives. For example, he recruited Muhammad Mahmud Ismail Barawish back into operational service after the latter was released from a Palestinian jail in early 2001, transferring \$7,000 to him for the purpose of reorganizing the Islamic Jihad network in Hebron. Barawish and those under his command maintained regular contact with Ajuri, who instructed him to recruit operatives for "quality attacks." To facilitate such attacks, Ajuri provided Barawish with upwards of \$100,000, which Barawish then transferred to two of his recruits. Barawish reported back to either Ajuri or another individual in Damascus named "Muhaned" on terrorist attacks executed by the cell. [16]

Other West Bank Islamic Jihad operatives in close contact with the group's Damascus headquarters include Tarek Az Aldin, a senior operative from the Jenin area. Aldin served as a coordinator for several terrorist cells in the West Bank and as "the link to the movement's central headquarters in Syria." [17] Another such operative was Thaabat Mardawi, who was responsible for the deaths of 20 people and the injury of 150 others; according to an April 18 Israel Defense Forces report, Mardawi "was instructed and operated by the PIJ headquarters in Syria, with which he was in contact." [18]

#### PFLP-GC

Through the interrogations of Nasser Aweiss and other senior al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and PIJ operatives, Israeli authorities learned that PFLP-GC operatives have been training members of al-Aqsa, Islamic Jihad, and other Palestinian terrorist groups in PFLP-GC camps near Damascus. These Palestinian trainees travel through Jordan to the Syrian border, where Syrian officials meet them, check their names against a preapproved list, and escort them to PFLP-GC camps. PFLP-GC instructors then train them in terrorist tactics, while Syrian officials remain on the sidelines and ensure that the trainees are treated properly. [19] In February 2002, Ziad Nafa, a former PFLP-GC member, told a Jordanian court that one of the thirteen suspects then on trial for plotting to bomb the US embassy in Amman had asked him to arrange terrorist training for the suspects in Syria. [20] Beyond its activities in Syria itself, PFLP-GC is believed to maintain some fifteen offices and camps in Syrian-controlled Lebanon.

#### Weapons Smuggling

Palestinian terrorists also use Syria as a weapons-smuggling hub. In May 2002, for example, Israeli forces intercepted the weapons-smuggling ship Santorini. Dib Vaiza, the ship's captain, told Israeli authorities that Syria and Hezbollah had facilitated the PFLP-GC smuggling operation. [21] In December 2001, Jordan tried three Islamists accused of smuggling weapons from Syria to the West Bank for attacks on Israelis. Two other suspects remain at large, including Abd al-Muti Abu Miliq, a Palestinian with Syrian travel documents who was sentenced in absentia to fifteen years of hard labor for his role in the al-Qaeda millennium terrorist plot in Jordan. [22] In June 2000, Israel arrested a Lebanese citizen traveling from Syria to the West Bank via the Allenby Bridge as he attempted to smuggle weapons (including katyusha rockets) in his vehicle. [23] And in January 2002, an Israeli court unsealed indictments against five Druze residents of the Golan Heights who were caught smuggling military-grade Claymore roadside bombs and hand grenades across the Syrian-Israeli border. The weapons, which bore instructions for achieving maximum casualties and damage to "people and vehicles," were to be delivered to the West Bank. [24]

#### A Threat to Peace

Even as several Damascus-based Palestinian terrorist groups denied that Syrian officials instructed them to close their offices, one PA official commented, "Of course they aren't doing any journalistic work out there. . . . [They] have their own weapons, their own cells, as well as independent bases" in both Syria and Syrian-controlled Lebanon. [25] Moreover, a PA security official has described Palestinian terrorist groups based in Damascus as "people who work for the Syrian intelligence," adding, "they are a big threat to the PA and the peace process." [26] To be sure, the *raison d'être* of such groups is undermining the PA, hurting Israel, and torpedoing efforts to reach a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

#### Al-Qaeda in Syria

Even as Damascus provided intelligence that prevented a terrorist attack on the US Navy's Administrative Support Unit in Bahrain, President Bashar al-Asad's tightly run police state both increased its support for groups like Hezbollah 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." [27] In early May, 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." [28] Moreover, according to Italian prosecutors, "Syria has functioned as a hub for an al Qaeda network" linked to prominent al-Qaeda operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. [29] 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. [30] 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." [31] 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." [32]

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. [33] 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.

Nor is this the first or only link between the September 11 plotters and al Qaeda elements operating in Syria. The al-Qaeda cell uncovered in Madrid was run almost entirely by Syrians who started their careers as radical Islamic extremists as members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In a letter addressed to "the Syrian Secret Services Department" which authorities found in his home, Madrid cell member Ghasoub al Abrash Ghalyoun admitted having been a member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Ghalyoun's brother admitted to Spanish authorities that he sought refuge in Spain to escape Syrian "persecution" of the Islamic Brothers there. [34]

Ghalyoun is suspected of surveiling the World Trade Center, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and other American landmarks during a 1997 trip to the United States. In one surveillance video, he is overheard expressing his concern that "security forces" may confiscate the videos before he could send them to the "brothers" in Syria. [35] In another instance, Ghalyoun rebukes an associate, Ayman al Jamlakhi, for speaking his name into the camera. Inferring that their al Qaeda bosses would never know of his security lapse, Jamlakhi responded saying, "This tape will not go to Syria, unless Allah wants me to be caught here, in the United States." [36]

### Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon

Since Asad inherited the presidency from his father, Hezbollah 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 Hezbollah operative who had entered the area on a Canadian passport. The arrest coincided with the discovery in Hebron of mines previously used only by Hezbollah in Lebanon. [37] 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

Hezbollah contacts.[38]

Hezbollah 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.[39] According to senior US officials, Hezbollah 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.[40] 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 US authorities, Syrian spokeswoman Buthaina Shaaban recently responded, "I don't think this is the issue of the moment." [41]

In a sharp break from the caution exercised by his father, Bashar al-Asad is reported to have integrated elements of Hezbollah'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.[42] Indeed, with Syria's blessing, Hezbollah 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.

Hezbollah and al-Qaeda

In June 2002, US and European intelligence officials described Hezbollah as "increasingly teaming up with al-Qaeda on logistics and training for terrorist operations." [43] This alliance, described as "ad hoc," "tactical," and "informal," was said to involve mid- and low-level operatives.[44] By September 2002, officials were describing this partnership as "the most worrisome" of al-Qaeda's new tactical alliances.[45] For example, al-Qaeda operative al-Zarqawi is known to have traveled from Baghdad to Syria and Lebanon, meeting with leaders from Hezbollah and other extremists in southern Lebanon.[46] 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.[47] 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.[48]

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 Hezbollah and the PFLP-GC dot the Syrian and Lebanese landscapes, where Hezbollah 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 Hezbollah camps in Lebanon and Iran.[49]

Conclusion

The liberation of Iraq, confirmation of Abu Mazen as PA prime minister, and presentation of the Quartet's Roadmap have created a rare opportunity to deescalate the past thirty-two months of Israeli-Palestinian violence and move toward a renewed peace process. It is now critical that Damascus heed President George W. Bush's June 24, 2002, call to "choose the right side in the war on terror." Syria must close terrorists groups' offices and training camps, end its support for such groups, deport their leaders, and restrict their activities in Lebanon.

But Syrian sponsorship of terror is not limited to Palestinian groups targeting Israel; it includes proactive support for Hezbollah and a safe haven for al-Qaeda. In a recent letter to the White House, Senator John Kerry noted, "Syria and Lebanon have for years funded terrorists and provided a safe haven for terrorists' blood money." [50] 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.

Notes [1] "Powell Urges End to Hezbollah Border Presence," Ha'aretz, 5 May 2003. [2] Ibid. [3] Agence France Presse, 31 March 2003. [4] Ibid. [5] Thomas Omestad, "The Syrian Factor: Does Damascus Have Reason to Worry that it's Next in Line for Regime Change?" US News and World Report, 21 April 2003. [6] Agence France Presse, 6 April 2003. [7] Ibid. [8] Bernard Weinraub, "Fighters from Syria Among Iraqi Prisoners in an American Camp," The New York Times, 19 April 2003. [9] William Langley and David Bamber, "Passports to Martyrdom," Sunday Telegraph (London), 4 May 2003. [10] Ibid. [11] Amos Harel, "Shin Bet Arrests More Than Twenty Hamas Activists," Canadian Jewish News, 4 October 2001. [12] Ze'ev Schiff, "Sources Say Syria Pushing Hamas to Renew Attacks," Ha'aretz, 20 May 2002. [13] "A May 2002 Interview with the Hamas Commander of the al-Qassam Brigades," The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), No. 403, 24 July 2002. [14] Israel Defense Forces, The Fatah and the PA Security Apparatuses in the Jenin Area Closely Cooperate with PIJ and Hamas, 9 April 2002. [15] Ibid. [16] "Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism (Based on the interrogations of arrested Palestinian terrorists and captured Palestinian Authority documents)," Israel Defense Forces, Military Intelligence, September 2002. [17] Israel Defense Forces, "Arrest of a Lead[ing] Islamic Jihad Operative," 20 June 2002. [18] Israel Defense Forces, Jenin, the Palestinian Suicide Capital, 18 April 2002. [19] Colonel Mirri Eisen (Israel Defense Forces), interview by author, Tel Aviv, 6 June 2002. [20] Daniel Sobelman, "Jordan To Indict 18 on Terror-Linked Charges," Ha'aretz (Tel Aviv), 7 February 2002. [21] "Code Name: El Kuds. This is how the Hizballah Plan of Stages for the Destruction of Israel is Falling into Place," Yediot Ahronot Seven Days Magazine, 1 February 2002. [22] "Three Islamists Plead Not Guilty to Planning Attacks on Israeli Targets," Jordan Times (Amman), 25 December 2001; Agence France Presse, 24 December 2001. [23] Agence France Presse, 21 July 2001. [24] "ISA Uncovers Golan Weapons Infiltration," statement released by the Israeli prime minister's media advisor, 9 January 2002. [25] Khaled Abu Toameh, "Terror Groups Deny Receiving Orders to Shut Damascus Offices," The Jerusalem Post, 5 May 2003. [26] Ibid. [27] Al Nahar, 9 April 2003. [28] "Lessons for the Future," Newsweek (web exclusive), 8 May 2003. [29] Sebastian Rotella, "A Road to Ansar Began in Italy: Wiretaps are Said to Show how al Qaeda Sought to Create in Northern Iraq a Substitute for Training Camps in Afghanistan," The Los Angeles Times, 28 April 2003. [30] Ibid. [31] Sebastian Rotella, "Probe Links Syria, Terror Network: Italian Investigation Finds the Country Was A Hub for Shuttling Money and Recruits to Iraq," The Los Angeles Times, 16 April 2003. [32] Sebastian Rotella, "A Road to Ansar Began in Italy: Wiretaps are Said to Show how al Qaeda Sought to Create in Northern Iraq a Substitute for Training Camps in Afghanistan," The Los Angeles Times, 28 April 2003. [33] Sebastian Rotella, "Probe Links Syria, Terror Network: Italian Investigation Finds the Country Was A Hub for Shuttling Money and Recruits to Iraq," The Los Angeles Times, 16 April 2003. [34] Spanish court document, case 35/2002, 19 July 2003, author's personal collection. [35] Keith Johnson, "Spanish Authorities Find Mapping Trail of Terror Money in Daunting," The Wall Street Journal, May 15, 2003. [36] Spanish court document, case 35/2002, dated July 19, 2003, author's personal collection. [37] Lenny Ben-David, "Iran, Syria, and Hizballah: Threatening Israel's North," Jerusalem Issue Brief 2, no. 3 (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs), 18 July 2002. [38] Al-Sharq al-Awsat (London), 8 August 2002. [39] Lenny Ben-David, "Iran, Syria, and Hizballah: Threatening Israel's North," Jerusalem Issue Brief 2, no. 3, 18 July 2002. [40] Author's interview with senior US official. [41] Nora Boustany, "Diplomatic Dispatches: Syrian a Pro at Public Relations," The Washington Post, 30 April 2003. [42] "Hizbollah could strike Israel in case of US war on Iraq - army officer," Jordan Times, 19 November 2002. [43] Dana Priest and Douglas Farah, "Terror Alliance Has US Worried: Hizballah, al-Qaeda Seen Joining Forces," The Washington Post, 30 June 2002. [44] Ibid. [45] Susan Schmidt and Dana Priest, "US Fears Low-Level al Qaeda Attacks," The Washington Post, 9 September 2002. [46] David Kaplan, "Run and Gun: Al Qaeda Arrests and Intelligence Hauls Bring New Energy to the War on Terrorism," US News and World Report, 30 September 2002. [47] Spanish court document, case 35/2002, dated 19 July 2003, author's personal collection. [48] Agence France Presse, 7 May 2003. [49] Grand Jury Indictment, United States of America v. Ahmed al-Mughassil et al, United States

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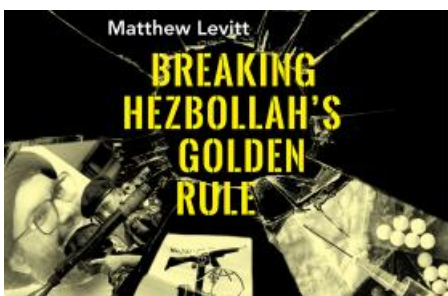
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