

World Should Confront Terrorist Haven of Syria

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Palestinian terrorists ambushed a convoy of Israelis in Hebron on Nov. 15, killing 12 and wounding 16. Despite their denials, Syria is fully aware that its Palestinian proxy groups plan, fund and order such attacks from Damascus headquarters.

Condemning the attack, Secretary of State Colin Powell said, "It is impossible to understand how any country that claims a genuine commitment to peace can harbor such groups." The U.S. ambassador to Syria, Theodore Kattouf, then delivered a sharply worded message to the Syrian Foreign Ministry, requesting that the Islamic Jihad offices in Damascus be shut.

In response, the Syrians asserted that the "offices run by various Palestinian factions in Damascus were media offices used to express Palestinians views." A spokesperson said "military operations" were planned in the West Bank and Gaza and "were not the result of instructions sent from the media offices in Arab capitals."

The evidence, however, belies the Syrian explanation. In Damascus, Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Abdullah Shallah claimed responsibility for the attack, boasting that the "operation wasn't spontaneous. It was preplanned. ... The jihad will continue."

Such was also the case in June, when Mr. Shallah claimed responsibility for a suicide bus bombing in Israel that killed 17 people just five days after Syria assumed the rotating presidency of the U.N. Security Council. In fact, Islamic Jihad commander Iyad Sawalhe oversaw the attack at Mr. Shallah's instruction.

Contrary to Syrian claims, Mr. Shallah and other Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus maintain close operational contact with several Islamic Jihad terrorists in the West Bank. Documents seized by Israeli forces during the springtime Operation Defensive Shield -- which U.S. officials deem authentic -- highlight the regular contact Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus maintain with their West Bank commanders. Consider the following examples:

Tarek Az Aldin, a senior Islamic Jihad terrorist in the West Bank, oversaw the activities of several West Bank cells in coordination with Islamic Jihad headquarters in Syria.

Taabat Mardawi, a senior Islamic Jihad operative, responsible for the deaths of 20 people and injuries of 150 others, received operational instructions from Islamic Jihad headquarters in Syria.

Both Mr. Mardawi and Ali Saffuri, perhaps the most senior Islamic Jihad operative in the West Bank until his capture in April, regularly called Mr. Shallah, including once in the middle of fighting in Jenin that same month. In phone and e-mail communications with Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus, the two sought clarifications of Islamic Jihad policies regarding terrorist attacks, informed of successful attacks so Islamic Jihad leaders could claim responsibility, requested money and received instructions on bomb-making and arms production.

Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus sent Mr. Saffuri instructions and diagrams for producing improvised explosive devices. During interrogation, Mr. Saffuri said he received approval from Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus in late 2001 to reach an operational agreement with Fatah elements to carry out joint attacks. Fatah is the biggest faction within the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is headed by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Islamic Jihad officials in Damascus play a particularly active role in financing the group's suicide and other terrorist operations. According to seized documents, Ramadan Shallah transferred \$127,000 from Damascus to the personal bank account of Islamic Jihad terrorist Bassam al Saadi in Jenin.

Another Islamic Jihad leader in Damascus, Akram Ajuri, recruited Muhammad Barawish back into operational service after Mr. Barawish was released from a Palestinian jail in early 2001 and sent him \$7,000 to reorganize the Islamic Jihad network in Hebron. Mr. Ajuri instructed Mr. Barawish to recruit operatives for "quality attacks," for which he provided more than \$100,000. Mr. Barawish reported back to Islamic Jihad headquarters in Damascus on each terror attack executed by his cell.

While Syrian officials stress the "informational character" of Islamic Jihad's offices, claiming their work "is limited to expressing their viewpoint," the fact is that the offices serve specifically operational functions. Moreover, they do so at the pleasure, behest and service of the Syrian government.

Syria's active support for terrorist groups of "global reach" has expanded, not shrunk, since Sept. 11. Damascus summarily ignored President Bush's June 24 demand that Syria "choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organizations."

Its refusal to heed Mr. Bush's call and its proxies' continued and increasingly heinous attacks suggest that Democratic Sen. Bob Graham of Florida and Republican Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama are right: If Syria won't, the United States should be prepared to deal with the terrorist headquarters and training camps in Syria and Lebanon. ❖

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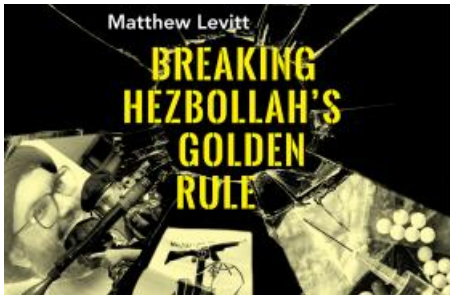


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