

# Syrian Sponsorship of Global Terrorism: The Need for Accountability

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Sep 19, 2002

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Brief Analysis

**O**n September 18, 2002, Matthew Levitt, the Institute's senior fellow in terrorism studies, testified before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, Committee on International Relations. The following is a summary of his remarks. [Read the full testimony. \(/policy-analysis/view/syrian-sponsorship-of-global-terrorism-the-need-for-accountability1\)](/policy-analysis/view/syrian-sponsorship-of-global-terrorism-the-need-for-accountability1)

With its longstanding support for terrorism, Syria poses an exceptional challenge to U.S. antiterror policy. On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush declared that "from this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime." This declaration implicitly offered state sponsors a virtual amnesty for previous actions if they would cease sponsoring terror, an offer that Syria has thus far rejected. In June 2002, the president directly called on Syria to "choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organizations."

Yet to date, there have been no consequences for Syria's continued and proactive support for terrorist groups of "global reach." If nothing else, the Syria Accountability Bill now under consideration would reestablish the credibility of the president's words by setting up a measure of accountability for Syrian sponsorship of terrorism and other dangerous actions.

While the bill has both detractors and proponents, there is agreement among both camps on five basic points: (1) although a member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, Syria violates the Council's oil embargo as it pumps approximately 150,000 barrels per day in illicit Iraqi oil; (2) Syria is also in violation of the Council's arms embargo, procuring arms and military spare parts for Iraq; (3) Syria has an advanced chemical and biological weapons program and is actively pursuing the technology for a medium-range missile delivery system; (4) Syria continues to occupy Lebanon in violation of the Taif Accord; and, most critically, (5) Syrian support for terrorist groups of global reach has increased since Bashar al-Asad came to power.

## Current Syrian State Sponsorship of Terrorism

Syria provides safe haven to the leaderships of at least seven terrorist groups on the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organization list. Many recruits have been sent to Syria, where they receive weapons training as well as

lessons in the preparation of explosives, suicide operations, intelligence activities, and hostage taking.

- Hizballah is the main terrorist group enjoying the fruits of Syrian state sponsorship. According to various press reports, Syria has integrated elements of Hizballah's military units into the Syrian army in Lebanon. Breaking with his father's caution, Bashar has even started supplying Hizballah with heavy arms (complementing Iranian arms transshipped via Damascus), including a new 220 mm rocket. Moreover, senior U.S. officials have indicated that Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah secretary-general, and Imad Mugniyeh, one of the most wanted Hizballah terrorists, are known to be working together plotting terror attacks globally and across the UN-certified Blue Line separating Israel and Lebanon. Hizballah operatives also continue to surveil U.S. interests (among others) and plan attacks. At Syria's behest, Hizballah has entered the Palestinian arena by sending operatives to attempt terrorism inside Israel and also by establishing links with other terrorist groups based in the West Bank and Gaza. In March 2002, Hizballah recruited, trained, and dispatched a cell of Palestinians that killed seven Israelis in a cross-border raid on the northern Israeli community of Metsuba.
- Israeli authorities have uncovered more than twenty Hamas activists who were recruited in various Arab countries and sent to Syria for terrorist training. In May, Damascus reportedly offered Hamas direct financial support if it renewed its suicide bombing campaign.
- Damascus-based Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leader Ramadan Shallah ordered the June 5, 2002, suicide bus bombing at the Megiddo junction in northern Israel that killed seventeen people and wounded more than forty others. Shallah himself transfers funds -- \$170,000 in one instance -- from Damascus to the personal bank accounts of individual PIJ terrorists in the West Bank. Besides harboring PIJ leaders, Syria actively promotes PIJ terrorism by facilitating terrorist training of the group's proxies on Syrian soil.
- Israeli authorities have indicated that members of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, PIJ, and other Palestinian groups have undergone terrorist training in Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) camps south of Damascus. Traveling through Jordan, the Palestinian trainees are met at the Jordan-Syria border by Syrian officials who check their names against a preapproved list and escort them to the camps run by PFLP-GC. In addition, a former PFLP-GC member told a Jordanian court in February that one of thirteen suspects on trial for plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in Amman asked him to arrange terrorist training in Syria for the plotters.
- Syria also supports the most radical elements in Lebanon's lawless Palestinian refugee camps. For example, the Return Brigades and al-Nathir, both Fatah offshoots, are linked to renegade Fatah Colonel Munir al-Maqdah. Mainstream Fatah officials say Maqdah receives "millions of dollars" from Syria and Iran.
- Syrian support for terror undermines efforts to deny al-Qaeda fugitives safe haven. In fact, the lack of central rule in some southern Lebanon refugee camps provides some al-Qaeda members shelter and support.

### **Addressing Critics of the Syria Accountability Bill**

Bashar al-Asad is waiting to see if the Bush administration is serious or if its warnings are mere empty words. In the meantime, the Syria Accountability Bill has many detractors. Some in the administration suggest that the bill would push Syria into Iraq's arms. Others have voiced their concern that holding Syria accountable for its blatant support of international terrorism might undermine the "reformist tendencies" of Syria's "youthful" president. Still others warn that the United States has multiple, sometimes competing, foreign policy and national security interests and that they cannot all be pursued with equal vigor at once; attempting to do so, the theory goes, would undermine them all. [These concerns are thoroughly addressed in the full statement of this testimony; see the URL listed above.]

Most significant, some senior administration officials have articulated the concern that the Syria Accountability Bill would curtail the administration's margin of maneuverability and thus deny them the flexibility necessary to conduct foreign policy. In fact, the act incorporates a presidential "national security interest" waiver clause and,

indicating its respect for the administration's need for flexibility, requires the government to select only two of the five most sensitive proposed sanctions. This "margin of maneuverability" sends Asad and others the clear message that sponsoring certain terrorist groups may be tolerated in return for some level of cooperation against other groups.

Syria cannot be permitted to leverage cooperation related to the war on terror for American indifference concerning the regime's persistent terrorist activities. For example, despite Syrian intelligence sharing regarding the interrogation of al-Qaeda commander Mohamed Zammar, U.S. officials have been denied direct access to Zammar. Syrian cooperation appears to be limited to those radical Islamic elements seen as a threat to the Alawite regime, even as it actively sponsors the other radical Islamist groups of both Sunni and Shi'i persuasions mentioned above.

Inducing Syria to abandon its support for terrorism through financial, diplomatic, or even military pressure will not be easy, even if such measures are coupled with face-saving gestures. Nevertheless, it is essential that the United States follow through on its declared policy of zero tolerance for state sponsorship of terrorism. U.S. officials have stated unequivocally that such sponsorship must end, and that the organizations supported by Syria are terrorist groups of global reach. History dictates that an even greater risk to U.S. interests will emerge if Washington fails to live up to its word; such a failure will ensure that future pleas to end terror are heard, if at all, as nothing more than diplomatic background noise.

*This summary was prepared by Merissa Khurma. ❖*

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