

Syria and the War on Terrorism (Part I):

A Post–September 11 Assessment

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

Jan 23, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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

As the Bush administration surveys options for the next phases in the war on terrorism, scant attention has been focused on Syria -- despite the fact that Dr. Bashar al-Asad's regime has been among the world's most active supporters of terrorism, even after September 11.

Background

Syria is a charter member of the State Department's state sponsors of terrorism list, subject to relevant bilateral economic sanctions. However, efforts to convince or compel Syria to renounce terrorism, in both word and deed, have historically been of lower priority than encouraging Syrian moderation in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Indeed, successive U.S. administrations have seemed to act on the supposition that the path to ending Syrian support for terrorism is via a Syria-Israel peace treaty. Since the prospects for Syrian-Israeli peace receded after the failed Clinton-Asad summit of March 2000, neither goal -- ending Syrian terrorism or pursuing Syrian-Israeli peace -- has been a high priority for the United States.

After the Al Qaeda attacks in September, the Bush administration focused once again on the role of state sponsors, but with a twist. The wording of President Bush's September 20 declaration -- "From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime" -- implicitly offered state sponsors a virtual amnesty for previous actions, should they jettison the terrorist option and join fully in the campaign to stamp out terror. This message was reinforced vis--vis the Syrian case when the United States did not oppose Syria's election to the world's most elite security club -- the United Nations Security Council -- one week later.

Syria's Record, Post-September 11

Since September 11, Syria has undertaken some positive measures in the war on terrorism. They include the following:

- the reported arrest in the village of Deir a-Zor of four Syrian nationals and an unspecified number of foreigners allegedly affiliated with Al Qaeda (reported in a November 23 communiqu  of the Syrian Human Rights Organization);

- the provision of access for an FBI agent to visit Aleppo and question individuals who knew September 11 mastermind Muhammad Atta in the mid-1990s; although reported in numerous press stories, knowledge of the visit was denied by Syrian officials who also denied any official cooperation between Syria and the FBI;
- the sharing of intelligence with U.S. agencies on people and organizations linked to Al Qaeda; the New York Times has cited unnamed U.S. officials as stating that a senior CIA official held secret discussions with a Syrian counterpart relating to Al Qaeda; while unconfirmed, it is suspected that some of the intelligence cooperation centered on Mamoun Darkazali, the fugitive Syrian businessman who appears to have served as a key financial conduit between Atta's Hamburg cell and Al Qaeda;
- public statements by Syrian officials suggesting that the organizations headquartered in Syria limit themselves to political activity, not including terrorist operations;
- reports of a slowdown in the flow of arms from Tehran to Damascus, transshipped under Syrian military escort to Hizballah in Lebanon, in the weeks leading up to Syria's election to the Security Council; this apparent slowdown, which sources now say was short lived, was originally noted by an unnamed Israeli foreign ministry official cited in the Jerusalem Post.

Continued Support of Terrorism

The significance of these measures notwithstanding, the most important theme of Syria's policy on terrorism since September 11 is "business as usual." In fact, no country appears to have rejected the Bush administration's outreach approach as dismissively as has Syria.

According to the State Department, seven of the twenty-eight terrorist groups cited in Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000 receive some level of sponsorship and support from Syria, and a number of "Specially Designated Terrorists," such as senior Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzook and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leader Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, coordinate terrorist activities and reside in Damascus. From these headquarters, the groups and leaders incite, recruit, train, coordinate, and direct terrorism. Indeed, since September 11, no fewer than four organizations -- PIJ, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and Hizballah -- have undertaken operations, from suicide bombings to assassinations, resulting in the deaths of dozens of civilians and an Israeli cabinet minister.

If any trends can be discerned, evidence suggests that Syrian efforts to promote terrorism have expanded under Bashar al-Asad's rule. Since Bashar took office, Israeli authorities have uncovered more than twenty Hamas activists who were recruited in various Arab countries and sent to Syria for terrorist training. The recruits received weapons training, as well as lessons in the preparation of explosives, intelligence activities, hostage taking, and suicide operations. Additionally, since Asad inherited the presidency from his father, there is strong evidence that the Syrian-backed Hizballah has moved energetically into the Palestinian arena -- both by sending its own operatives to attempt terrorism inside Israel (for example, the case of Shahab Rada [Gerhard] Schumann, arrested in January 2001) and by establishing links with terrorist groups in the West Bank, Gaza, and among Israeli Arabs (for example, Hizballah operatives working with Force 17 colonel Masoud Ayad in Gaza reportedly directed small arms and mortar attacks against Israeli civilians in Gaza; similarly, a Hizballah operative recruited a terrorist cell of Israeli Arabs from the Galilee village of Abu Snan, which was uncovered by Israeli authorities as the group was planning kidnapping operations that would have targeted Israeli soldiers).

The Israeli navy's seizure of the Karine-A weapons boat -- in which Hizballah played a central role, according to evidence that State Department spokesman Richard Boucher called "compelling" -- is not the only example of weapons smuggling tied to Syria and its proxies. In December 2001, for example, Jordan's State Security Court opened a trial of three Islamists accused of smuggling weapons secured from Syria to the West Bank for attacks on Israelis. Two other defendants remain at large, including Abd al-Muti Abu Miliq; Abu Miliq is a Palestinian with

Syrian travel documents who was sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor in absentia in the September 2000 trial of twenty-eight Islamists plotting terrorist attacks at the turn of the millennium. 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. And recently, an Israeli court unsealed indictments against five Druze residents of the Golan who were caught smuggling Claymore roadside bombs and hand grenades across the Syrian-Israeli border. The weapons, bearing operating instructions for achieving maximum casualties and damage to "people and vehicles," were to be delivered to the West Bank.

Conclusion

A review of Syrian activity, even post-September 11, provides compelling evidence that the Asad regime remains an active sponsor of international terrorism, operating on many fronts and via many organizations. Indeed, of the seven state sponsors on the State Department's list, Syria rivals Iran for conducting the most frenetic activity in support of terrorism. While the Syrians have offered some assistance in terms of intelligence -- of indeterminate value -- on Al Qaeda connections to Syrians and Syria, Syria has apparently decided to reject out of hand President Bush's offer of amnesty vis-à-vis the anti-Israel terrorism most central to Syria's regional policy.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

[Read Part II of this two-part series. \(templateC05.php?CID=1474\)](#) ❖

Policy #595

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

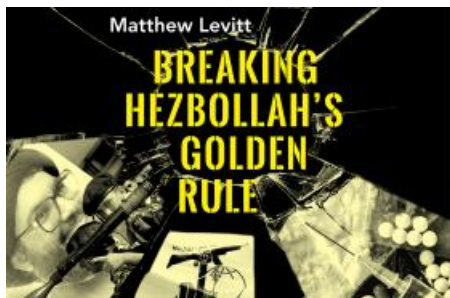
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)