

Syria and the Global Jihad: A Dangerous Double Game

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Since the 1960s, the Syrian regime has used terrorism to advance its goals in both the internal and regional arenas. Syrian terrorist activity has included a range of methods, such as assassinations of rivals at home and abroad and various attacks on Israeli, Jewish, and Western targets around the world. The tactics Syria has used over the years have varied according to needs and circumstances. The regime in Damascus has at times sent its own agents to launch terrorist attacks, and at times has operated proxy organizations such as al-Saiqa. At other times Syria has provided close support for various organizations serving its interests, such as the Fatah Revolutionary Council (Abu Nidal) and the Popular Front–General Command under Jibril’s command. On a few occasions, the regime provided more passive aid to Palestinian terrorist organizations such as the Popular Front and even to foreign terrorist organizations such as the Kurdish PKK and the Japanese Red Army. These organizations were granted shelter in Syria and used Syria as a base of operations for activity abroad.¹

This policy, which began under Hafez el-Asad, continues to serve his son Bashar. At the same time, Syria under Bashar is concentrating its efforts primarily on indirect help, especially for Hizbollah, and on mostly passive aid for Palestinian terrorist organizations, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in particular. The non-Arab foreign terrorist organizations that formerly operated in Syria were asked to leave. In addition, the Syrian regime is avoiding, at least for now, using its own agents for terrorist activity. The exception is Syria’s activity in Lebanon where Syria has no qualms about eliminating its political rivals.

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The change in Syria's operational terrorism policy stemmed mostly from the international risks involved in being directly implicated in terrorist attacks. Ever since 9/11, it has been clear even to the Syrian regime that staging terrorist attacks is liable to provoke a harsh international response. Thus a significant portion of Syrian support for terrorism is channeled indirectly to global jihad elements, which are not operated by Syria as proxy organizations, rather are allowed to reside in Syrian territory and operate out of it freely against enemies of the Syrian regime. Today, the primary arena where Syria-based global jihad elements are active is Iraq and to a lesser extent Lebanon.

This article presents Syria's links to global jihad elements and examines the advantages and risks inherent in these links for Bashar al-Asad's regime. In particular, it explores the use Syria makes of the terrorism-supporting card in order to consolidate its regional and international standing. In both arenas, this leverage serves on the one hand as proof of Syria's centrality in the global struggle against terrorism, and on the other, as a tool for mitigating political and military punitive measures resulting from its involvement in terrorism, especially in Iraq and Lebanon.

Syria's Links to Global Jihad

In the wake of its occupation by the allies in 2003, Iraq joined Afghanistan as a central arena of action for global jihadists. Consequently, Syria became the most important geographical crossroads for volunteers to fight the foreign forces in Iraq. Historical concerns along with current political interests (Syria as part of the "axis of evil" and the camp opposing American influence) have made the Damascus regime an important party regulating and helping the many global jihad fighters that streamed toward Iraq. As for the Lebanese arena, even after its withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Syria still views this western neighbor as its own backyard. Therefore, alongside its wide range of activities in "Cedarland," Syria maintains links with jihadists operating there and supervises them at some level or another.

The Iraqi Arena

In recent years Syria has become the logistical rear for global jihadists operating in Iraq and the main crossroads for the jihadists en route to

Iraq to fight the American troops. Furthermore, it is where an extensive supply of false Syrian passports are issued to these volunteers.² In fact, Syria allowed key al-Qaeda activists in Iraq to use its territory for weapons supplies and financing. Public disclosure of this activity emerged following the killing of Badran al-Mazidi (Abu al-Ghadiyah), a senior al-Qaeda logistics operative in Iraq, in an American Delta Force commando operation in the Syrian village of Sukkariyeh near the Iraqi border on October 26, 2008. According to American intelligence sources, Abu al-Ghadiyah had been operating in Syria for a number of years, smuggling money, weapons, and fighters on behalf of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda commander in Iraq. When Zarqawi was killed in 2006, Abu al-Ghadiyah continued to operate under Abu Ayyub al-Masri, Zarqawi's successor. US intelligence indicates that Abu al-Ghadiyah would supply global jihadists with false passports, train them, provide them with safe houses, and supply them with weapons and other supplies. These volunteer jihadists came from many countries in the region – Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Abu al-Ghadiyah made housing arrangements for them in Damascus and the port city of Latakia with the help of Syrian intelligence officers. After moving the volunteers into Iraq, Abu al-Ghadiyah's men on the east side of the border would continue to see to their logistical needs.³

Moreover, American military sources stated that in addition to the logistical support that global jihadists receive in Syria, the Syrian president allows al-Qaeda operatives to train on Syrian soil.⁴ The *Sunday Times*, for example, following a visit to Sukkariyeh where Abu al-Ghadiyah operated, quoted a local leader who explained that everyone in the village knew that jihadists were active in the area. "You can often hear gunfire near the border that has nothing to do with clashes but are just the fighters training," he said. He added that "there are regions along the border that the Syrian security service (the Mukhabarat) has closed, and I think that that is where the jihadists are. Those places have the best access to Iraq."⁵ According to senior American officials, Syria and Iran also supply al-Qaeda networks in Iraq with bomb-making materials and help them improve the quality of their explosives.⁶

Most importantly, until recently Syria was the main source of the suicide bombers active in Iraq. Thus in 2007, American military sources

claimed that “85-90 percent of the suicide terrorists in Iraq enter the country through Syria,”⁷ and despite repeated appeals Syria has not managed – or not wanted – to stop the flow of Sunni suicide bombers into Iraq.⁸ In the course of 2008, though the situation improved and the flow of suicide terrorists into Iraq slowed significantly, American sources maintain that this resulted from successful activity on the part of Iraqi and coalition forces along the border with Syria.⁹

The Lebanese Arena

In Lebanon, Syria’s engagement in global jihad elements is less pronounced. A number of Sunni fundamentalist groups active today in Lebanon include Lebanese, Palestinian, and foreign activists who trained and fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other global jihad locations. These elements are concentrated in two primary geographical areas, first, the Palestinian refugee camps in the south and the north that function like extraterritorial Lebanese areas generally avoided by local security services. The second geographical area with a fundamentalist Islamic presence is the city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon. Tripoli is home to a large Salafi (extreme Sunni movement) community. Dozens of its activists have left the city to fight against the coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Similar to the situation on its border with Iraq, Syria allows jihadists free passage into and out of Lebanon and apparently to some extent helps Islamist parties. Sources in Beirut, for example, accused Syrian intelligence of helping strengthen the fundamentalist Fatah al-Islam organization in the region. These accusations were sounded in particular during the Lebanese army’s battles against group activists in the summer of 2007 in the Nahar al-Bard refugee camp, and have been raised on a number of occasions since.¹⁰

The Double Game: Profits and Risks

Profits

The double Syrian game bestows on Damascus a number of important advantages. The first is a tool that can both harass and wear down American forces in Iraq and demonstrate Syria’s very real preventive potential to the Americans. Syria views the American presence on its eastern border as a significant threat, i.e., it fears the United States is

liable to use its forces against it or threaten its regime in light of the serious difference of opinion with Syria's current leadership. Because of Syria's sense of inferiority vis-à-vis US power, jihadist activity in Iraq is a powerful tool against American forces through the terrorist, guerilla, and insurrection activities that global jihad elements can undertake against them in Iraq. At the same time, Syrian officials cooperate with Washington in terms of intelligence on the issue of global jihad in a way that allows Syria to demonstrate its resolve and goodwill in helping the international coalition's war on terror. According to American officials, this sort of cooperation takes place between the two sides on an ongoing basis: for example, the coordination between Syria and the United States regarding the raid by American commando forces on Sukkariyeh in October 2008.¹¹

The second advantage is the profit in political standing and image that stems from participation in international forums on stabilizing the situation in Iraq. Syria's policy as a partner in international forums against global jihad allows the regime to present itself as an active player in the struggle against global terrorism. Thus, for example, Syria took part in an international conference on Iraq in Sharm el-Sheikh in April 2007, and even hosted a similar conference in Damascus in November 2008. These diplomatic events were exploited by the Syrian regime in its efforts at an image make-over and self-presentation to the world as an indispensable part of the solution to the problems in Iraq. As Syrian deputy foreign minister Faisal Mekdad explained on one occasion, "It is in the interests of Syria and Iraq to prevent illegal border crossings. We have arrested hundreds if not thousands of people who tried to cross into Iraq, and have contributed a great deal to the stabilization of this region."¹² Thus, the activity of global jihadists within its borders itself and the belief that the regime in Damascus can in fact operate against them cast Syria as a relevant factor in the regional and international arenas in terms of curbing global jihad.

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The Syrian regime that allows global jihadists to operate within its borders even succeeds in presenting itself to the international

community as a victim of terrorism. A prominent example is the attack that occurred on September 27, 2008 in Damascus, when a car laden with explosives was detonated near Syria's intelligence installation. Six weeks later, on November 9, Syrian television broadcast a videotaped confession in which eleven members of Fatah al-Islam – the same group that was allegedly supported by Syrian intelligence – admitted they launched the attack. The group members confessed to have been financed by Saudi Arabia and the anti-Syrian Lebanese al-Mustaqbal movement headed by Saad al-Hariri. The suicide attacker, they said, came from Saudi Arabia. The attack itself was meant to be part of wave of bombings aimed at official Syrian and Western targets in the country with the goal of undermining the regime's stability.¹³ In light of fundamentalist activity in northern Lebanon, Bashar al-Asad even raised the possibility of Syrian military intervention in Lebanese territory.¹⁴

Syria has also reaped temporary immunity from global jihadist activity against the Alawi regime. In the short term, the aid Syria delivers to global jihadists contributes to the distancing of their terrorist threat against Syria somewhat, on the assumption that al-Qaeda and associated operatives would not want to harm the primary channel by which they infiltrate Iraq. In fact, as noted by the head of Israeli intelligence, until the September 27 car bomb explosion in Damascus

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there was a kind of unwritten agreement between the regime and global jihadist factions. This agreement granted the operatives immunity and free passage to Iraq and Lebanon, in exchange for their not acting against the regime.¹⁵ Thus, though it would seem that the secular Alawi (a sect that broke off from the Shia) regime would be one of the regimes the global jihadists seek to replace with a *sharia*-based Sunni regime, it is never mentioned by jihadist spokesmen as one of their avowed enemies.

In addition, helping global jihadists in Iraq gives Damascus the ability to influence events within its neighbors' borders. This confers on it a position of strength in relation to the new Iraqi government, and also turns it into an important factor in

any regional or international forum dealing with solutions to the Iraqi situation. Likewise in the Lebanese arena, the double-edged policy provides Damascus with important advantages. Support for fundamentalist groups may offer the regime an additional way to affect events on the internal Lebanese arena. Though Syria closely supports the Shiite Hizbollah, a potential rival of the global jihadists, support for the latter may in the mid and long terms afford Syria the ability to break its exclusive dependence on Hizbollah should violent power struggles between Shiites and Sunnis break out. Maintaining channels of influence among both Shiite and Sunni militants may also strengthen Syria's future status as mediator in an ethnic Shiite-Sunni confrontation. Such a confrontation would seem to be only a matter of time, as noted by Sheikh Baroudi, a leader of the Salafi community in Tripoli after the battles of May 2008: "There is no possibility of reconciliation with Hizbollah."¹⁶

The links between Syria and global jihad factions in Lebanon also have ramifications from the local standpoint of Tripoli itself. The city is home to an Alawi minority with strong connections to the regime in Damascus. From May to September 2008 there were violent clashes between Alawis and Salafi fundamentalists in the city.¹⁷ Therefore, maintaining a Syrian channel of influence and dialogue with some of these factions may help Syria in the future ease the tensions between the sides. In addition, as in the Syrian arena, support for jihadists strengthens Syria's role as a relevant regional and international agent in solving Lebanon's security and other problems. At the same time, nurturing global jihadist elements grants Syria an additional potential channel for terrorism against Israel on Israel's northern border, as well as in the neighboring countries of Jordan and Egypt.

Risks

Alongside these advantages, Syria's double game with jihadists entails a number of risks for the Damascus regime. The first is American operations against it. On the international arena and particularly vis-à-vis the United States, Syria is walking a very fine line between partner and enemy. Syria's role in curbing global jihadist activity in Iraq is clear to the American administration. To date, Washington has chosen not to confront Damascus directly on its involvement in terrorism, perhaps

because of the intelligence cooperation between the two nations, as well as America's reluctance to open yet another confrontational front in the Middle East. Nonetheless, jihadist presence in Syria clearly represents the potential for a blow-up between the United States and Syria, and gives the American administration a possible excuse for an operation against Bashar al-Asad.

The second risk involves potential jihadist operations. There is ongoing tension between Islamic fundamentalists and the Alawis, as the latter are considered heretical by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Moreover, in light of the cruel suppression of the Islamic revolt in Syria between 1976 and 1982, there is still an account to be settled between the local fundamentalists and the Alawi regime. From al-Qaeda's perspective, a confrontation with the heretical regime in Damascus and the option of turning Syria itself into a jihadist arena are currently rejected – or postponed – only for pragmatic reasons. However, in the long term, the ongoing presence of global jihadists in Syria enables them to get to know the local scene intimately, to make connections with local fundamentalists, and to establish operational and logistical networks. All of these are liable in the future to exacerbate the threat these factions pose to the stability of the Damascus regime.

Indeed, lately the presence of global jihadist operatives in Syria has possibly turned from more of a potential problem into a concrete challenge for the Damascus regime. In early September 2008, large military forces were deployed along part of the northern border with Lebanon. Senior Syrian officials explained the purpose of the action as tightened control of human traffic. Lebanese sources added that Syria is trying to curb the crossing of fundamentalist operatives into the Syrian cities of Homs and Hama. During the 1980s these cities were the center of the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-regime activity.¹⁸ At the same time, the deployment along the border did not prevent the terrorist car bomb in Damascus on September 27 that killed seventeen civilians, nor did it prevent a number of violent clashes between Syrian security forces and Islamic fundamentalists in the Yarmouk camp and in Damascus itself during October 2008.¹⁹ In the longer term, global jihadists might become a more acute security challenge for Syria should it sign a peace agreement with Israel. In such a scenario, both Hizbollah and

fundamentalists in Lebanon and Syria might try to settle accounts with the Alawi regime.

Syria's role as a logistical rear for jihadist activity in Iraq is a source of ongoing tension between the two countries. Even as diplomatic relations between the two were restored, for example, Syrian foreign minister Walid Mualem declared that his country would cooperate in the struggle against violence in Iraq, to which the Iraqi government spokesman responded, "We would like to see the good intentions translated into action."²⁰ Two years later, relations between the two countries continued to be tense. Officials in Baghdad made clear that despite closer ties, there would be no commercial relations with Syria until Damascus proved its ability to stop providing shelter and support for terrorism bodies.²¹ Though at present this tension has not materialized in deeds, it would seem that in the long run Bashar al-Asad's regime is cultivating yet another potential enemy.

Conclusion

The double policy Syria has been pursuing on the issue of terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Ever since the 1960s, the Syrian regime has resorted to various elements against its enemies in the local, inter-Arab, and international arenas. Organizations such as al-Saiqa, Abu Nidal, and the Popular Front-General Command served Syria as proxy agents against both Israeli targets and rival Arab regimes such as the Iraqi Baath party and the Jordanian Hashemite kingdom. Similarly, the Syrians operated the Palestinian organization Fatah Abu Musa against Arafat, who was subject to intense Syrian hatred, and assisted local Lebanese organizations such as Hizbollah and the National Syrian Party in attacks against Israel and international forces in Lebanon. For instance, Syria helped Hizbollah undertake the double suicide attack against the American marines base and the French forces in Lebanon in the early 1980s. As in the past, operating and extending aid to various terrorist organizations is one of the policy tools the Syrian regime uses in order to advance its varied interests. Especially given the lack of significant

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financial or strategic assets, the terrorist-supporting card is a Syrian tool for amassing influence, as it enables the regime the ability to derail different political processes by either promoting or preventing terrorist attacks.

Nonetheless, unlike the relationships the Syrian regime maintained with various terrorist factions in past years, the link between Syria and global jihadists entails a relatively high risk for the regime in Damascus. In the past, all the elements operated by Syria as proxies viewed the Syrian regime as a legitimate Arab national regime and a leading factor in the struggle against Israel and the United States. Today, however, global jihadists aided by Syria view the Alawi regime in Damascus as a heretical abomination. Thus, toppling the Syrian regime is seen by them as an independent objective. From their point of view, fulfilling this objective will arrive in due course after more pressing issues – first and foremost the expulsion of the American presence in Iraq – have been settled. At the same time, because of its links with these terrorist factions, Syria is risking an American or international response. Therefore, the Syrian romance with global jihadists may reveal itself as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it may lead to a confrontation with global jihadists should circumstances change (e.g., Syrian action against them, a peace agreement with Israel, a change in their priorities), while on the other hand, it may lead to a confrontation (diplomatic or military) with the United States and the West.

At any rate, the United States, as long having been the standard-bearer of the struggle against rogue regimes actively supporting terrorism in general and in recent years against global jihadists in particular, must take a clear and resolute stand against the semi-covert aid Syria extends to jihadist factions. In this context, two policy steps are particularly important: public exposure and unequivocal condemnation of the role Syria plays in terrorism in Iraq, along with the threat of sanctions against Syria unless it stops. While there has been a drop in the number of terrorists coming from Syria,²² this is not enough, and the Syrian regime must be confronted with the facts testifying to its double game. The new administration of President Obama, which may want to engage Syria in dialogue on a range of issues that would help Syria extricate itself from the axis of evil, must also include the

uncompromising demand to desist from aiding terrorism in general and global jihadist terrorism in particular.

As a rule, in terms of public statements and exposure, Israel prefers low profile policies when it comes to the struggle against the global jihad, and it is in its interest that this task be left to others. Nonetheless, this should not prevent it to continue to make its unique contribution in the field of intelligence in order to expose the involvement of all elements aiding global jihad, Syria among them.

Notes

- 1 Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Syria at a Crossroads* (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Me'uhad Press, 1999), pp. 116-18; Moshe Maoz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography* (Tel Aviv: Dvir Press, 1988), pp. 179-81; Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 462-64.
- 2 *Maariv*, July 7, 2005, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART/961/656.html>.
- 3 *Middle East Times*, November 21, 2008.
- 4 *Middle East Newslines*, June 4, 2007.
- 5 *Sunday Times*, November 2, 2008.
- 6 *Middle East Newslines*, June 4, 2007.
- 7 *Middle East Newslines*, March 29, 2007.
- 8 *Middle East Newslines*, March 29, 2007.
- 9 *Middle East Newslines*, December 19, 2008.
- 10 *New York Post*, September 30, 2008; *Daily Star*, November 8, 2008.
- 11 *Sunday Times*, November 2, 2008.
- 12 BBC, December 12, 2008.
- 13 BBC News, December 12, 2008.
- 14 *The Guardian*, September 28, 2008; *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2008.
- 15 *Haaretz*, October 26, 2008.
- 16 *Christian Science Monitor*, September 24, 2008.
- 17 BBC, August 13, 2008; David Schenker, "Stability in Lebanon," *Policy Watch* No. 1406, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2, 2008.
- 18 *The Guardian*, September 28, 2008.
- 19 SANA, September 29, 2008; *Middle East Newslines*, October 12, 2008.
- 20 Ynet, November 21, 2006, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3330678,00.html>.
- 21 *Haaretz*, September 17, 2008.
- 22 See the report issued by General Petraeus, December 19, 2008, as in *Middle East Newslines*, December 9, 2008.

