

Confronting Syrian-Backed Terrorism

U.S. policymakers rightly blast Damascus for backing Palestinian, Lebanese, and other terrorist groups, but they often fail to grasp the Syrian regime's ambivalent relationship with several of its clients and the nuanced way it manages them. Over the years, Syria has aided a daunting array of terrorist groups, but it seldom has been an ardent supporter. Damascus has both bolstered and weakened the Palestinian cause, encouraged and constrained Hizballah in Lebanon, abetted and arrested Iraqi insurgents, and otherwise demonstrated considerable care and variance in how it uses terrorist groups. Syria also tries to portray itself as part of the solution to terrorism, demonstrating not only its efforts to halt Al Qaeda but also its ability, for the right price, to shut down the very groups it sponsors. As Middle East expert Michael Doran contends, "Ever since the 1980s, Syria has played this game of being both the arsonist and the fire department."¹

Syria's Deadly Relationship with Palestinian Militants

Damascus has long staunchly supported various Palestinian movements and, for just as long, sought to control, limit, manipulate, and thwart them when they threatened Syria's interests. This ambivalence has led Damascus to champion the Palestinian cause and provide various violent Palestinian movements with a wide array of support even as it dealt bloody blows against these same elements at other times. Today, Syria remains an impor-

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tant supporter of several Palestinian terrorist movements but does not control the cause as a whole.

ORIGINS UNDER HAFIZ AL-ASSAD

Syria's ambivalent relationship with the Palestinian cause took shape during the reign of Hafiz al-Assad, who ruled Syria from 1970 until his death in 2000. As Patrick Seale contends, "In theory [Hafiz al-Assad] was with it heart and soul, in practice it was a constant source of trouble."² Hafiz held a genuine ideological commitment to the Palestinian cause, but he also sought to use the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and other Palestinian factions as a weapon against Israel. He aimed to regain the Golan Heights, which Syria had lost to Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967, and more generally to demonstrate Syria's continued opposition to Israel.

Hafiz al-Assad turned to terrorism in part because Syria's armies had failed him. Israel's rout of Syria in 1967 and its lesser but still decisive victories in 1973 and 1982 demonstrated that Damascus had no conventional military options against Israel. For Hafiz to achieve any of his strategic goals, he needed a means of inflicting pain on Israel. Only then, in his eyes, could Damascus force the Jewish state to make concessions on the Golan Heights or otherwise accommodate Syria.

In addition to using the Palestinians against Israel, Syria also used Palestinian factions in its rivalry with its Arab neighbors. Syria supported the Palestinians in their struggle against Jordan's King Hussein in 1970. As the Syrian-Jordanian rivalry continued in the 1980s, Hafiz employed the Abu Nidal Organization, a radical and exceptionally murderous Palestinian splinter group, to intimidate King Hussein by attacking Jordanian officials in Europe. The Syrian intimidation campaign contributed to Jordan's decision to back away from initial efforts to work with Israel and the PLO to reach a deal on the West Bank.³

Despite its utility in the struggle against Israel and for regional leadership, the Palestinian cause was a double-edged sword. Palestinian guerrilla attacks against Israel could escalate into an all-out war that Syria would lose. In addition, enthusiasm for the Palestinian struggle could inflame the passions of the Arab world, leading to pressure on Arab regimes to act and even to popular revolts against the existing leaders. Because these options would be disastrous for Syria, the regime had to control as well as exploit the Palestinian cause. Control was particularly important after Hafiz consolidated power and Syria gave an impressive showing in the 1973 war with Israel, becoming far more of a status quo power.⁴

From the PLO's point of view, Syria's attempts to dominate the movement and control its actions were a grave threat. The Palestinians were con-

cerned both about Damascus's desire to dominate Lebanon, the PLO's main base from 1970 until 1982, and about its eventual opposition to the PLO's claim to be "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."⁵ Palestinian leaders tried to resist Syrian dominance, which in turn led to violent clashes. Most devastatingly, in Lebanon in 1976, Syria militarily intervened against the Palestinians and their allies to prevent their victory over Christian forces in the civil war. After the Israeli invasion in 1982 and the subsequent expulsion of much of the PLO leadership from Lebanon, Syria also worked with the Palestinian rivals of PLO leader Yasser Arafat to foster an all-out struggle for power within the Palestinian movement, a struggle that left Arafat in power but gravely weakened, particularly in Lebanon.

The Syrian regime has had an ambivalent relationship with several of its terrorist clients.

The Syrian regime also leaned heavily on the Palestinian cause to bolster Damascus's weak legitimacy. Hafiz al-Assad had taken power in a military coup and never institutionalized his rule, despite repeated attempts. Syria lacked strong political parties, an efficient bureaucracy, respected courts, and other basic institutions. In essence, Hafiz ruled through the military, the security services, the Alawi community (followers of the Alawi sect of Islam, representing only 11 percent of Syria's population), economic cooptation, and family ties, all of which undermined efforts to build strong institutions.

The sectarian nature of the regime was a particular problem. Many Sunni Muslims, who make up more than half of Syria's population, consider the Alawis to be heretics. When the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood challenged the government from 1976 until 1982, it was opposing what it declared to be an apostate Alawi regime. Although the regime brutally crushed the uprising, its sectarian nature remains a problem. Foreign rivals of Hafiz's regime, such as the Ba'athist regime in Iraq and at times King Hussein's regime in Jordan, played on this theme of illegitimate Alawi domination in their criticism of the Syrian government.⁶ As expert Raymond Hinnebusch notes, "Resentment of Alawi dominance remains the main source of the regime's legitimacy deficit."⁷ Hafiz was thus forced to embrace the Palestinian cause as the *sina qua non* of Arab unity.

Until 1986, Syria was also quite active in using its own agents for operations. These agents attacked Syrian dissidents, Palestinians who sided with Yasser Arafat, Iraqi officials, and moderate Arab state officials, as well as Israeli and Jewish targets. After outside pressure grew in response to several terrorist outrages, in 1986 Syria refrained from using its own operatives to

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mount clandestine attacks and tried generally to minimize its direct hand in any violence. To allow itself deniability, it decided to use terrorist groups exclusively instead of its own agents. Pressure from the United States and several European countries made Damascus fearful that using its own operatives would greatly increase that pressure and perhaps even lead to military strikes. Outsourcing terrorism reduced these risks. As the U.S. Department of State

report noted at the time, “Damascus utilizes these groups to attack or intimidate enemies and opponents and to exert its influence in the region. Yet at the same time, it can disavow knowledge of their operations.”⁸ This deniability served a useful purpose, enabling Syria to distance itself when necessary from the actions of its proxies.

After the Cold War ended and the peace process gained momentum, Syria supported an array of violent anti-Israeli movements that rejected the peace process. In 1991, after the Madrid peace conference that brought Israel, Palestinian leaders, and various Arab states together, Hamas and other militant Palestinians, mostly secular and Marxist, established the “Ten Front” in Syria to oppose negotiations.⁹ The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command (PFLP-GC), the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Hamas, and Hizballah all attacked Israel, the latter three being particularly active before as well as after the second intifada broke out in September 2000. Some of these groups used terrorism, while others, particularly Hizballah, also use guerrilla warfare.

Syrian leaders supported and strengthened these groups, even though they seldom shared the specifics of the groups’ agendas. Syria, of course, rejected the Islamist groups’ visions of governance. Even more importantly, Damascus often seriously engaged in peace negotiations with Israel, which had a heavy U.S. role to boot, using its backing of terrorism to extract concessions from Israel on the particulars of the border or to ensure that Syria itself was not excluded from any settlement. Ironically, Damascus viewed terrorism as vital to its peace negotiations strategy. Having built its legitimacy on being the most steadfast Arab regime, however, backing away from the more militant Palestinian groups was difficult. Domestic critics of Hafiz’s regime were often quick to seize on any perceived softening toward Israel.¹⁰

The impact of terrorist attacks by groups with ties to Syria was considerable, going far beyond the death toll they inflicted. The attacks demon-

strated the inability of the Palestinian Authority to completely stop the violence, although the latter's cooperation with Israel did reduce terrorism for many years. In turn, this fed Israeli suspicions of Arafat and made the Israeli public far more skeptical that any concessions would lead to peace.

CONTINUITY UNDER BASHAR

Despite initial hopes that he would prove to be a reformer after his father died in 2000, Bashar al-Assad has made at best cosmetic changes to open up Syria's political system or change its basic foreign policy orientation. Like his father, Bashar openly ties his regime to the Palestinian cause. The State Department reports that Syria still provides political and material support to numerous Palestinian rejectionist movements, including Hamas, the PIJ, the PFLP, and the PFLP-GC.¹¹ The sanctuary these groups find in Syria, even though Damascus itself is often not directly involved in their actions, allows them to coordinate their activities, organize, and otherwise operate with little interference. Given Israel's highly skilled military and impressive counterterrorism capabilities, Palestinian groups have benefited considerably by being able to conduct these activities with limited Israeli interference at most.

Syria claims that these and other Palestinian groups are a legitimate, armed resistance movement, not terrorists. Damascus also contends that these groups only conduct political activities from Syrian soil, a claim that is hotly disputed.¹² Ambassador Cofer Black, when he was State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, testified that the United States has "seen evidence that some of these offices are, in fact, used for operational purposes."¹³ The State Department reports that the PIJ receives "limited logistic support assistance from Syria," as does the PFLP and PFLP-GC.¹⁴ Syria also provides the PFLP-GC with military support and Hizballah with diplomatic, political, and logistical support.¹⁵ The United States contends that Hamas and the PIJ do not receive funding or arms directly from Syria but that Syria probably allows them to raise funds and buy or receive arms from others with little interference.¹⁶ Such claims suggest that Syria helps these groups sustain and organize themselves, even though several of them, particularly Hamas, would remain potent organizations even without a major Syrian role.

The logic for Syrian support remains consistent with the past, but if anything, Bashar appears to be in a weaker domestic position that makes him even more dependent on terrorist groups for legitimacy. His father steadily consolidated power, ruling for 30 years in the face of numerous domestic and foreign challenges. As such, he had a strong power base within his regime and considerable credibility as an opponent of Israel. Bashar, in contrast, was rushed into senior positions by his father and has not built up the same

authority and credibility. He holds power in part by not challenging any of the country's main factions,¹⁷ and his utterances are largely a mask for strategic and domestic concerns. As the International Crisis Group notes about Bashar, "His approach is ideological in the sense that ideological fidelity is an important ingredient in a pragmatic strategy of regime survival. This has meant avoiding any radical departure from his father's approach, which would have exposed him to strong domestic criticism."¹⁸

Syria and Hizballah

In addition to its long-standing ties to Palestinian movements, Syria is also a major backer of Hizballah, a terrorist and guerrilla group active in Lebanon since the early 1980s. Syria allows Hizballah to enjoy a sanctuary in Lebanon, where it also allows Iran to arm and train Hizballah's members. Using Hizballah as a proxy allows Damascus some degree of deniability, enabling it to strike at Israel or other targets without risking the confrontation that direct military action would entail.

Hizballah has proven a remarkably effective force against Israel. Although the United States knows Hizballah best as the terrorist organization responsible both for the devastating attacks on U.S. diplomats as well as military forces and for taking Western hostages in Lebanon in the 1980s, Hizballah in the 1990s became one of the world's most formidable guerrilla forces. As one Israeli officer noted, "Hizb'Allah are a mini-Israeli army. They can do everything as well as we can."¹⁹ By 2000, Hizballah had forced Israel out of Lebanese territory, marking the first time that Arab arms ever forced Israel to concede territory.

Hizballah also helps Palestinian terrorist groups become more lethal. Since the outbreak of the current Al Aqsa intifada in September 2000, Hizballah has stepped up its support for Hamas, the PIJ, and other anti-Israeli groups. This support includes guerrilla training, bomb-building expertise, tactical tips such as how to use mines against Israeli armor, and propaganda from Hizballah's radio and satellite television stations. Hizballah operatives have also been caught smuggling weapons to Arabs in Israel, and its experts have helped Palestinian groups build deadly bombs.

As with the Palestinians, support for Hizballah also offers the Syrian regime domestic political benefits, largely due to Hizballah's lionization in much of the Arab world. Bashar in particular has sought out the blessing of Hizballah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, suggesting that the traditional dominance Damascus exerted over the organization may be more limited today.

Hizballah responds to the Syrian regime's needs. In March 2005, Hizballah orchestrated a massive counterdemonstration in Beirut to oppose calls for Syrian forces to withdraw from Lebanon. When Damascus wants to avoid a

confrontation, Hizballah will also lie low. When Hafiz met with President Bill Clinton in January 1994, for example, Hizballah refrained from attacks on Israel. During January–August 2003, when U.S. pressure on Syria heated up before and after the war in Iraq, Hizballah again halted attacks on Israel to avoid getting its patron into any more hot water.

As the above fluctuation in Hizballah's activities suggests, Damascus appears to exercise a veto power over Hizballah's military operations in Lebanon. Indeed, many observers believe that the road to south Lebanon runs through Damascus. As Human Rights Watch notes, "By controlling Hizballah's prime access to arms, Syria appears to hold considerable influence over Hizballah's ability to remain an active military force in the south."²⁰ Syria's potential influence is even greater. Damascus fears unrest in Lebanon, and recent protests indicate that the fear is legitimate.

As a result, its intelligence on the country is superb. Damascus knows the identity and location of Hizballah's core membership and many of its sympathizers. Moreover, Syria has repeatedly proven it will be ruthless and is willing to inflict thousands of civilian casualties to root out any opposition. Syria's large military and intelligence presence could even act directly against Hizballah if Damascus deemed it necessary.

In essence, Damascus has acted as a passive supporter of Iraqi anti-U.S. insurgents.

The Next Front? Syria and the Iraqi Insurgency

Syria has provided a range of support for Iraqi anti-U.S. insurgents of various stripes but has done so in a way that ensures a degree of deniability. In essence, Damascus has acted as a passive supporter, helping former regime elements and even jihadists by not aggressively policing its borders or controlling its territory. Damascus walks the line between undermining the U.S. position in Iraq and incurring the full brunt of Washington's wrath.

Although details are scarce, Iraqi insurgents appear to exploit Syrian territory in several ways. Senior members of the former Iraqi regime organized and controlled parts of the insurgency from Syrian territory, with little interference from Damascus. Although Damascus has turned over some leading insurgent leaders (Saddam Hussein's half-brother and 29 other former regime officials, for example, in 2005) as a concession to U.S. pressure and to gain U.S. goodwill on issues such as the Syrian position in Lebanon, U.S. military leaders responsible for Iraq still characterize Syrian cooperation as "very unhelpful."²¹

In addition, Syria is a transit point for money and fighters, most of whom were raised outside Syria, traveling to Iraq.²² In October 2003, the Defense Intelligence Agency described Syria as a “major point of access” for jihadists and noted that Syrian border police gladly look the other way if they receive a bribe.²³ Although some of this access may relate to a regional tradition of smuggling, made worse by the networks developed to elude sanctions in the 1990s, Syria has in the past demonstrated that it can exert considerable control over its territory when it chooses, something it has done at best intermittently so far. To be clear, the activities Syria tolerates are not essential to the insurgency’s survival, but they do make the anti-U.S. opposition stronger and more difficult to counter.²⁴

As with the Palestinians and Hizballah, Damascus is playing a careful game. On one hand, Syria wants the United States to get bogged down in Iraq and, more generally, to abandon regime change as a policy. Damascus also seeks to have its proxies become stronger in Iraq, fearing that rival countries, particularly those with ties to Turkey, Israel, or other Syrian enemies, might dominate the opposition. Finally, the Syrian leadership wants to placate domestic sentiment, which is strongly against the U.S. intervention, and even allowed demonstrations in support of the insurgents, an unusual move for a regime fearful of any popular agitation.²⁵ On the other hand, Syria does not want unrest, particularly Islamist unrest, to spill over into its territory. Damascus also remains fearful of a U.S. military response and recognizes that too much or too blatant support for the insurgency would be a dangerous course.

On Balance: Mixed Rewards for Syria

Although the costs are daunting, support for terrorism offers Syria many benefits. Through terrorism, Syria has helped undermine a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. In particular, it was able to prevent a separate Israeli-Palestinian peace, which would have left Syria isolated and with few levers to use in pursuit of regaining the Golan Heights. Syria has at times also successfully used terrorism to intimidate its neighbors. Its campaign against Jordan through the Abu Nidal Organization and others for many years made Amman less willing to cut a deal with Israel and the Palestinians that Damascus opposed. This campaign also demonstrated to Washington that any regional deal had to include Syria.²⁶ Syria’s tough stand against Israel and support for the Palestinian cause also paid off for the regime politically. Over time, the regime gained considerable credibility as a steadfast opponent of Israel, and even many of Hafiz al-Assad’s opponents supported his approach.²⁷ Syria also gained protection from outside challengers to its legiti-

macy: Hamas has never challenged the Ba'ath party, despite its shared heritage with the party's Islamist opposition.²⁸

Support for terrorism, however, has had considerable costs for Syria. Backing Palestinian rejectionists led Syria into clashes with Israel, some of which were disastrous. In 1967, Israel's forces devastated Syria's military, leading to the loss of the Golan Heights and regime instability. In 1982, Syrian and Israeli forces engaged in a limited conflict in Lebanon after Israel invaded, but the result was equally one-sided. In addition, Syria's backing for the latest round of violence that began in September 2000 has met with a limited military response. In April 2001, Israeli forces killed four Syrian soldiers when Israel bombed a Syrian radar station in Lebanon following a Hizballah attack. Under similar circumstances, it struck another Syrian radar station in July 2001. In October 2003, Israeli warplanes bombed a training camp for Palestinians in response to a suicide attack by the PIJ.²⁹ The U.S. response to Israel's strikes was supportive, with President George W. Bush declaring, "We would be doing the same thing."³⁰

Syria has exerted considerable control over its territory when it chooses.

In Syria's negotiations with Israel over the Golan Heights, terrorism was both a benefit and a curse. Terrorism helped lead Israel to the negotiating table. Without the pain inflicted by terrorism, Israel would have had few incentives to surrender territory. On the other hand, terrorism caused the Israeli public to distrust Syria. After a series of suicide bombings in 1996, the Israeli public became skeptical of the possibility for peace. Syria's refusal to shut down the headquarters of groups such as the PIJ or even publicly express sorrow made both the Israeli people and government doubtful that Hafiz truly wanted peace.

For the Israeli government, Damascus's unwillingness to distance itself from terrorists increased the difficulty of forging a peace that it could sell to its own people. By the late 1990s, for example, a window of opportunity may have opened up as negotiations had reached a point where only minor material issues separated the two parties. Yet, Israeli leaders were often hesitant to make concessions, in part because mistrust of Damascus in their country was so widespread. By 2000, that window had closed. As Hafiz's health deteriorated, he became more focused on the smooth succession to his son Bashar and less willing to make concessions that might have led to criticism at home.³¹

Support for terrorism also damaged the Syrian regime's reputation with the United States. Syrian-backed Palestinian terrorism often had little direct

impact on U.S. citizens, but it did affect the security of Israel, an important U.S. concern. By contrast, Syrian support for Hizballah did contribute to the deaths of hundreds of U.S. citizens in 1983 and 1984, but Damascus has not been implicated in a Hizballah attack that has killed U.S. citizens in recent years. More broadly, various U.S. administrations have considered support for terrorism inherently objectionable and have limited their contacts with Damascus as a result. Because of Syria's ties to terrorism, many of the financial inducements that kept Jordan and Egypt at the negotiating table were not available to Syria. Moreover, as noted below, the United States has imposed sanctions and otherwise worked against Syria, in part because of the latter's support for terrorism.

Syria's actions in Iraq since the fall of Saddam have proven particularly egregious in Washington's eyes. After the September 11 attacks, Damascus provided considerable cooperation in the fight against Al Qaeda. Rather than reap the benefits of being an ally in the campaign against terrorism, however, Syria is often cited as the next possible target for a U.S. attack, due both to its historic ties to terrorists and its actions in Iraq. There is a cyclical chicken-and-egg quality to this issue. Damascus did not reap the full benefits of cooperation because the United States saw it as linked to other terrorist groups such as Hizballah and Hamas. Because the United States at times scorned Syria, particularly in public, Damascus was probably more willing to support anti-U.S. forces in Iraq, fearing that a failure to bog the United States down there could lead to its own disaster.

Limited Success in Curbing Syrian Sponsorship

The United States and Israel have both tried to halt Syrian-supported terrorism, with little success. Backing down in the face of limited Israeli pressure would be both a strategic and domestic political disaster for the Ba'ath regime. Strategically, support for terrorism is one of the few assets the Syrian regime enjoys in its struggle against Israel. If Israel could neutralize this with its conventional military power, Damascus would have no way of compelling Israel to make concessions on the Golan Heights or other issues. The domestic political impact would be even greater. The regime's legitimacy hangs heavily on its Arab nationalist credentials, which in turn depend on its opposition to Israel. Backing down in a public manner with nothing in return would eliminate what little appeal the Ba'ath regime enjoys among the Syrian public.

Yet, Syria does modulate its pressure to avoid provoking an Israeli response that it could not withstand. As such, it tries to preserve deniability and use Lebanon as a base for many of the terrorist groups it supports, both

of which maintain the fiction that Syria itself has at best limited involvement in anti-Israeli violence. Moreover, it restricts the operations and arms it provides, ensuring that the bloodshed does not rise to a point that forces Israel to respond due to domestic pressure. Modulating the violence and preserving deniability also keep regional states behind Syria, making it more difficult for Israel to gain the diplomatic support it needs to act. Given Israel's many other pressing security problems, only some of which are linked to Damascus, stopping Syrian backing for rejectionist groups is often not a priority.

The United States too, despite many years of pressure, has failed to persuade or coerce Syria into ending its support for terrorism. Syria was a charter member of the 1979 list of state sponsors of terrorism and has long suffered a range of U.S. diplomatic and economic pressure to end support for terrorism. Following the 1979 legislation, the United States cut off all economic aid to Syria. The United States has restricted arms sales, economic assistance, and access to dual use items and also opposed funding for Syria through multilateral economic institutions.³²

In part, the inconsistent U.S. response to Syrian-backed violence undercuts U.S. coercion. Washington has maintained diplomatic ties with Syria, in contrast to other countries officially identified as state sponsors of terrorism. The United States has also allowed trade and investment in Syria. In addition, the United States did not respond directly against Syria for such acts as the 1983 bombing of U.S. and French forces in Lebanon, despite boasting by Syrian officials years later that they approved the operation.³³ The United States also worked with Syria in Lebanon in the late 1980s and afterward, effectively accepting a Syrian satrapy there.

What explains this U.S. caution? Assad, both father and son, have tried to preserve their reputations as pragmatic and realistic negotiating partners, avoiding the ideological blindness that at times characterized other terrorism sponsors, such as Iran, Afghanistan under the Taliban, and Sudan. Moreover, the prospect of Israeli-Syrian peace also proved a major source of U.S. caution. For much of the 1990s, U.S. efforts to end Syrian support for terrorism were bound up in the Middle East peace process. As former Clinton and Bush administration official Flynt Leverett has testified, "[O]ur outstanding bilateral differences were to be resolved as part of a peace settlement between Israel and Syria. For example, it was generally understood that, as part of such a settlement, Syria would have no need for, and would sever its ties to, Palestinian rejectionists and disarm Hizballah fighters in southern Lebanon."³⁴

The U.S. and Israel have both tried, with little success, to halt Syrian-supported terrorism.

Given the Syrian regime's track record, carrots should wait until sticks produce results.

When the peace process collapsed at the outset of the second intifada in September 2000, pressure on Syria was initially limited as U.S. officials sought to restart the peace process. After the September 11 attacks, however, Damascus's ties to terrorist groups became far more important to U.S. officials than what was seen as an increasingly frail hope of reviving the peace process. As a result, the United States also stepped up the rhetorical heat on Damascus. In June 2002, Bush demanded that Bashar "choose the right side in the war on terror."³⁵ He later demanded that Damascus close

terrorist training camps. Other senior U.S. officials echoed the president's line.³⁶ For its part, Congress passed the Syrian Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Restoration Act, which increased economic restrictions on Syria.

Damascus has responded to the pressure by limiting its proxies and providing some cooperation on terrorism in general, but not by clamping down completely. In 2003, for example, Syria closed the "media of-

fices" of several Palestinian groups in Damascus. It also had urged Hamas and the PIJ to sign a cease-fire agreement with Israel. At the same time, however, senior Palestinian rejectionist leaders remained in Syria and continued to use cell phones and computers to direct operations from there.³⁷ During the run-up to the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq, Syria also was able to convince Hizballah to limit its guerrilla attacks and temporarily to halt supplies of Iranian arms to the group.³⁸ Yet, even as Syria made concessions, it opened the tap in Iraq. This combination was another way of reminding the United States that Syria can be both a valuable friend and a lethal enemy.

Syria's favored proxies have changed over the years, but Damascus's purposes have remained consistent: to gain additional strategic leverage against its foes and to shore up the regime's limited legitimacy at home. Syria has achieved these objectives, but this success has proved costly. The Ba'ath regime damaged its reputation with the United States and diminished its ability to make peace with Israel. Given the benefits of terrorism and the risks to the regime's legitimacy by abandoning these groups, however, the inability of either Israel or the United States to convince the Syrian leadership to mend its ways should come as no surprise.

Yet, recognizing the reasons for Syria's intransigence does not mean passivity should be U.S. policy. Damascus's support for terrorism is not the sole cause of continued Israeli-Palestinian violence or of U.S. problems in Iraq, but it does make a resolution more difficult. Continued pressure through

U.S. leadership and multilateral, particularly Arab, action can help push the Syrian regime in the right direction. Syrian sponsorship is not motivated by ideology, which makes it more amenable to outside pressure. Indeed, Damascus has repeatedly demonstrated that outside pressure will lead it to curtail its support for terrorists, even though its responses are halting, grudging, and often short-lived.

For now, Damascus is on the defensive. The stirring of the “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon serves as both an opportunity and a model. A combination of U.S. leadership and multinational pressure, including France and several Arab leaders, such as Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, proved particularly effective in convincing Damascus that it had no friend who would help it. As a result, Syria is drawing down its forces, at least for now, and the possible diminishing of its influence opens up opportunities in the long term to turn Hizballah away from terrorism. The terrorist group will have to respond more to Lebanese realities, several of which mitigate continued terrorism. The Lebanon experience is also a model. As it did after the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri—effected almost certainly at Damascus’s behest, if not necessarily by Syrian officials wearing official insignias—Washington should end the fiction of deniability that Syria has enjoyed in Lebanon. Because Damascus exercises such influence there, its support for terrorist proxies via Lebanon should not be tacitly accepted.

Should Syria move away from its Lebanese, Palestinian, and Iraqi proxies, easing pressure on Damascus is also appropriate. If the Syrian regime does move away from terrorist groups, the regime will need to produce economic results or otherwise restore some of its lost legitimacy, which is something that the international community can help bolster. Given the Syrian regime’s poor track record, however, carrots should wait until sticks produce verifiable and lasting results.

Notes

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