American Foreign Policy Council

Syria

QUICK FACTS

Population: 22,198,110

Area: 185,180 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 90.3%, Kurds, Armenians, and other 9.7%

Religions: Sunni Muslim 74%, other Muslim (includes Alawite, Druze) 16%, Christian (various denominations) 10%, Jewish (tiny communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo)

Government Type: Republic under an authoritarian military-dominated regime

GDP (official exchange rate): $54.99 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)

For the past five decades, Syria has used terrorist tactics to advance its goals internally and throughout the Middle East. The methods have varied according to needs and circumstances, however. In the past, Syria has used both its own agents and proxy organizations to launch terrorist attacks. While the regime continues to seek a balance between the promotion of secularism domestically and Islamism abroad, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has not limited his support to specific ideological strains of Islam. His government, working in tandem with the Islamic Republic of Iran, supports the Shi'a Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, even as it offers varying degrees

of assistance to the Sunni Salafist Fatah al-Islam in northern Lebanon. Syria similarly supports and hosts the external leadership of the Sunni Palestinian Hamas movement (an outgrowth of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood), while clamping down on the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood within Syria. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003, Syria also has served as the primary gateway for foreign jihadists entering Iraq.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Organized and effective Islamist opposition in Syria ceased to exist after President Hafiz al-Asad's brutal crackdown on the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982. Nevertheless, several groups—notably *Jund al-Sham* (the Army of the Levant) and *Ghuraba al-Sham* (Strangers of the Levant)—remain active in Syria.[1]

Jund al-Sham is an amorphous Islamic militant organization, and it remains unclear whether it is the creation of Syrian intelligence or of the late al-Qaeda lieutenant in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, or both. Yet the Syrian regime has claimed that the group carried out several attacks in 2005 and 2006, and that their security services managed to foil several terror attacks at its hands within Syria.[2]

The official stance toward *Ghuraba al-Sham* is similarly muddled, as it is difficult to ascertain whether the organization is truly independent or an invention of the government to provide an outlet for Sunni Islamist tendencies.[3] For example, in June 2006 Syrian security services clashed with terrorists who were allegedly planning an operation in Umayyad Square in Damascus. Those killed and apprehended were found in possession of CDs with sermons from the preacher of the Ash-Sharour mosque in Aleppo, Mahmoud al-Aghasi, also known as Abu Qaqa.[4] Known for his anti-American sermons and calls for the creation of an Islamist state in Syria based on *sharia*, he preached under the banner of *Ghuraba al-Sham*, albeit with a contradictory message.[5] In one television interview, he credits *Jund al-Sham* with the attack while at the same time denouncing the Muslim Brotherhood. In another interview he calls for working with the government to "achieve national unity in an Islamic man-

ner."[6]

The protests that have swept over the region since the start of 2011 have touched Syria as well. On March 6, 2011, security forces arrested 15 teenagers for spraying anti-regime graffiti on a wall in the southern city of Deraa.[7] Their continued detention sparked massive demonstrations in the city, which in turn were met by a brutal regime crackdown using live fire and tear gas. Asad's heavy-handed response led to the protests that spread across the country and continue as of this writing.[8] As in other Middle East states experiencing the "Arab Spring," the protests were not designed to bring about a greater role for Islam in the government. Nevertheless, Islam still played in a role in them, to the extent that the mosque is where people congregate for Friday afternoon prayers and the largest protests have come on Friday afternoons, following prayers.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Given the high degree of repression inside Syria, it has been difficult for opposition activists to organize within the country. This trend has continued throughout the 2011 protests as well. One observer in Syria noted in April 2011, "There is almost no organization inside Syria among the protesters… As I told my friend, the problem is that unlike Cairo's Tahrir Square, all the demonstrators are dispersed across the country and do not have enough time to talk to each other to decide what they wanted."[9] Nevertheless several dissident groups operate abroad, notably in Western Europe. The former Syrian Vice President, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, formed the National Salvation Front (NSF) with the London-based leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Sadr al-Din Bayanuni, in March 2006.[10] The NSF is an amalgam of both secular and Islamist opposition groups outside Syria and they held regular meetings with Bush administration officials in 2007 to discuss democracy promotion in Syria.[11] By 2009, the Muslim Brotherhood left the NSF, as differences in the approach to regional issues came to the fore, highlighting the fact that what had unified those in the NSF was opposition to the Asad regime, not the role of Islam in society or manner in which *muqawama*—resistance—should be practiced.

For example, Bayanuni supported Hamas during Israel's Operation Cast Lead at the end of 2008 and supported the Asad regime in its efforts to reclaim Lebanon, whereas Khaddam opposed Hamas and supported Lebanon's secular and pro-freedom March 14 coalition.[12]

In recent years, Sunni Islamism has become more pronounced, especially in Syria's larger cities. However, civil society's ability to extend external support to Islamist groups, or the ability of those groups to form an internal base within Syria itself, is nearly nonexistent, given the authoritarian nature of the regime. Instead, such Islamic fervor is harnessed and driven outward to neighboring countries to serve the needs and wishes of the Syrian regime. Even with the current uprising during the "Arab Spring," most of the Salafist groups within Syria have been penetrated by the regime and focused against its enemies in Iraq and Lebanon.[13]

While Shi'a Muslims currently constitute only around two percent of Syria's 18 million people, their numbers have grown considerably from 1953, when they numbered no more than 0.4 percent of the Syrian population. Official and reliable statistics pertaining to the birthrates among confessional groups in Syria are tightly regulated by the regime, but an increase in conversions from Sunni to Shi'a can be clearly observed. This increase is, first, the consequence of geography and history. The Shi'a of Syria possess a considerable number of institutions and shrines in the country, such as the tomb of Sayyida Zaynab and the Mosque of the Drop in Aleppo. Numerous pilgrims who help disseminate Shi'ite ideas and doctrines visit these sites. The Shi'a also build houses of study next to their shrines and establish religious authorities there, which has given them more independence with respect to religious rulings. When tallied in 2009, more than 500 *husayniyyas* (Shi'a houses of prayer) were said to be under construction in Syria; according to other sources, that number refers to *husayniyyas* in Damascus alone.[14]

A drift toward greater expression of Islamic sentiment within Syrian society has received extensive coverage in the media in recent years. More women wear the *hijab* while more men have grown beards and

declined to wear wedding rings.[15] There has also been an increase in the number of Islamic book shops and Islamist sayings that have replaced Ba'ath Party slogans.[16] Additionally, numerous nightclubs and restaurants that serve alcohol have been shut down.[17]

The regime's ability to channel Islamic fervor is best demonstrated by Syria's harsh response to the Danish cartoon episode of September 2005, when the newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published the likeness of the Prophet Muhammad. At least a thousand people held a demonstration outside the Danish embassy in Damascus where dozens then stormed and burned the embassy and replaced the Danish flag with the Saudi flag that reads, "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his Messenger."[18] At the same time, demonstrations in support of Hezbollah and Hamas were also organized.[19] Such behavior does not ordinarily occur in Syria, and should be viewed as a governmental decision to allow Islamists and their sympathizers to direct their anger externally rather than against the regime.

The 2011 uprising provided a unique glimpse into some of the tensions that exist within Syrian society. During the initial uprising in Deraa, in which the 15 teenagers were arrested, the usual response from the affected families would have been to quietly seek the intervention of religious and tribal leaders. However, the continued detention of the protesters sparked massive demonstrations focusing on the Deraa's historic Omari mosque, where even the state-vetted Sunni preachers were swept up by popular passions.[20] By the time the teenagers were released, the clashes between the Syrian security services and the protesters had already claimed many lives. This began a cycle of funerals, which themselves became rallying points for further protests—much like in Iran's anti-Shah student movement in 1979.[21]

By March 15th, the demonstrations had swept across the county. Syria specialist Gary Cambill described the revealing disparity: "Secular liberal dissidents took to the streets in relatively small numbers and avoided confrontations with the police, while Kurdish groups largely abstained. In contrast, the demonstrations in Deraa and other predominantly Sunni flashpoints were 20 to 30 times larger,

organized under the semi-inviolable protection of mosques and clearly intended to provoke the security forces. While it is premature to characterize the protests as an Islamist uprising, there is little doubt that those most eager to risk death or severe bodily harm are overwhelmingly Sunni and deeply religious."[22]

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Syria has been a stronghold of Arab secularism since the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963. As scholar Eyal Zisser observed, "The Regime forbade preaching and religious education outside the mosques, increased its involvement in the appointment of clerics to religious institutions in the country, took over the management of the Waqf institutions, and did not hesitate to arrest or even execute clerics who demonstrated against it."[23] The chief political and economic casualty from the rise of this coalition was the urban class in which the Muslim Brotherhood was grounded.

Following the rise to power of Hafiz al-Asad in November 1970, the regime attempted to improve its relations with Islamic elements within the state. Softening the anti-Islamic line held by his predecessors, Asad began to participate in prayers at Sunni mosques in Damascus, made a pilgrimage to Mecca, raised the salaries of clerics, and actively tried to gain religious sanction for his minority Alawi community.[24] The result was a 1973 *fatwa* handed down by Musa al-Sadr, the leader of the Lebanese Shi'a community, which legitimized the Alawis, declaring them to be lawful Shi'a and therefore Muslim in all respects.

Nevertheless, in 1976, Islamic militants, some of whom were former Muslim Brotherhood activists, rose up in a violent struggle against Hafiz al-Asad's regime with the goal of toppling the government and replacing it with an Islamic state. The Muslim Brotherhood joined this struggle soon thereafter, drawing their support from the urban Sunni middle class, especially in the northern region of the country. While the Sunnis represented 60 percent of Syria's population (today they represent closer to 70 percent), half the number lived in rural areas and the periphery and did not support the Muslim Brotherhood's vision.

The Islamic Revolt lasted from 1976 until 1982, reaching its peak in 1980. It ended in February 1982, when Asad quashed the Muslim Brothers in Hama, the state's fourth-largest town, obliterating the movement as an organized and active force. Tens of thousands were killed and many more were forced to serve long prison sentences. The group's leaders were forced into exile.[25] According to the Brotherhood, some 17,000 party members are either missing or detained inside Syria.[26]

The 1990s saw an improvement in the regime's relations with Islamic circles both inside and outside of Syria. The new direction was aimed at endowing Syria with an Islamic look and feel, but stopping short of full religious substance. Official Syrian sponsorship of Islam had the express purpose of preventing the mosque from becoming a source of rebellion. This was manifested through greater official openness to demonstrations of religious faith among Syrian citizens, and the release many members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had been held in Syrian prisons since the suppression of the Islamic Revolt.[27] Nevertheless, the regime continued to repress the Brotherhood, refusing to allow it to resume its activities in Syria. It became clear that Asad's conditions for reconciliation—namely, for the Brotherhood's leaders to repent, confess guilt, and express contrition over the Islamic Revolt and commit not to renew their political activity as an organized movement in Syria—were too difficult for the group to accept.

Bashar al-Asad became president after his father's death on June 10, 2000, and he continued efforts to promote an Islamic posture, including further efforts to Islamize the Alawi community. The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, tried to forge a relationship with the regime in Damascus following Hafiz al-Asad's death, driven by hopes that the organization—whose leaders had become increasingly irrelevant after years of exile—could again become a player in Syria's political scene. These aspirations proved futile, however; the regime under Bashar showed little readiness for compromise.

Other Islamist groups have fared little better. The regime's decision

to promote a state-sponsored version of Islam has left no alternative means to express any other form of political Islam. The only other prominent Islamic party is the Islamic Liberation Party (*Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami*), and its members are subject to frequent arrests by Syrian authorities. The group, which calls for restoring the Islamic caliphate, is banned in most countries and has only a small following in Syria. Asad's regime remains vigilant in arresting and detaining those suspected of Islamist activities with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.[28]

While the 2011 Syrian uprising has been largely free of Islamist overtones, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood still seeks a more prominent role and has capitalized on the opportunity to reinvent itself as a street movement. Zuhair Salim, a London-based spokesman for the Syrian branch of the Brothers explained, "We have a desire to coordinate the position of the opposition." Nevertheless, he declined to assume credit for the protests: "We are supporters, and not creators. The voice of the street is a spokesperson for itself."[29] Salim has become more visible in Arabic-language television programs since April 2011, when the Brotherhood decided to back the protest movement, or what the group refers to as a "peaceful, popular intifada," or resistance.[30]

The Muslim Brotherhood's attempts to steer the opposition, however, has been hampered as a result of several factors. Since 1980, membership in the brotherhood has been a capital offense and after the brutal crackdown in 1982, most of its leaders were sent into exile. The devastation wrought upon the party also made other anti-government figures wary of political Islam as an effective tool to challenge the regime and unsure of how to engage the group that has had no operational base within Syria for decades. The Brotherhood left the NSF in 2009, and there has been a power struggle for leadership in exile, with Muhammad Riad al-Shakfa replacing Bayanuni as head of the organization in the summer of 2010. Failed alliances coupled with brief overtures to the Asad regime have raised doubts over their ability to even lead the anti-regime movement from abroad, let alone within Syria.[31] As one Paris-based opposition member and scholar of contemporary oriental studies, Burhan

Ghalioun, explains, "Those 30 years destroyed their organization, and they lost their legitimacy because they changed positions so much without explanation over the past five years."[32]

Nevertheless, those gathered in Syria's streets have not yet coalesced around a central ideology or political platform. And as of yet, the Brothers do not possess anything tangible to offer the secular protesters. However, the longer the protests remain in a stalemate, the more appealing the Muslim Brotherhood's organization skills and funding may become. After all, despite the Brothers limited organizational ability, it remains one of the oldest anti-government movements in Syria with loose, external affiliations with other Arab Muslim Brotherhood movements.[33] They will likely continue to try to create an organized front with the secular protesters on the streets. The longer the uprising drags on, the larger the role the Brotherhood may play in the future of Syrian politics if the Asad regime falls.

If the Syrian government has long succeeded in co-opting Islamism at home, it has been active in the promotion of it abroad as a tool to increase its geopolitical standing in the region. The careful promotion and regulation of Islam pursued by Asad *pere* and *fils* were a clear departure from the traditional policy of the Ba'ath regime, which had sought to deprive Islam of any role or influence.

Lebanon

Syria's relationship with Lebanon's Shi'a militia, Hezbollah, dates back to the group's inception in 1982, when Damascus allowed the Iranian regime to send around 1,000 members of the Revolutionary Guards to the Beka'a Valley of eastern Lebanon, an area occupied by Syrian forces. At the time, Syria was also vying for influence over its smaller neighbor in the Levant. In the years that followed, Syria came to view Hezbollah as an integral tool in its struggle against Israel, as well as a means by which to project its influence onto the world stage.

By 1991, Damascus had become Lebanon's *de facto* overlord. This was the result of Syria's participation in the coalition to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. In return, Asad was given *carte*

blanche to act against General Michael 'Awn, the pro-Iraqi General who stood as an obstacle to achieving Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. The signing of the "Agreement of Fraternity and Cooperation" in May 1991 granted the Asad regime unprecedented control over Lebanon's political system, and allowed it to help shape Hezbollah's role in the country.

Relations between Syria and Hezbollah in the 1990s were a marriage of convenience. Syria had a clear interest in continuing to sponsor paramilitary attacks against Israel so long as the Jewish state retained the Golan Heights, and it permitted Hezbollah alone to serve as its chosen proxy. Although there were other militant groups that were allowed to launch occasional small-scale attacks, only Hezbollah was allowed the full range of terrorist activities, from recruiting and training, to deploying a sophisticated resistance apparatus. As such, Hezbollah represented Syrian interests in applying pressure on Israel, which in turn served as Hezbollah's main source of support and legitimacy from within Lebanon. Yet Hafiz al-Asad always applied strict political and military constraints on the group's operations.

The subsequent assumption of power by his son Bashar in the year 2000, coupled with Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon the same year, significantly altered the relationship between Damascus and Hezbollah. Whereas Hafiz al-Asad had maintained a measure of distance from Hezbollah's leadership, Bashar sought a more intimate connection. By 2001, Hezbollah's unqualified support for Syria's occupation of Lebanon—at a time when opposition to Damascus had been growing among most sectarian communities in Lebanon—elicited an unprecedented degree of support for the militia from the Syrian regime.

Under Bashar al-Asad's direction, Syria has increased its support of Hezbollah in several spheres. It has provided direct military support to the militia, complementing the massive support it already receives from Iran. In the years leading up to the 2006 summer war between Hezbollah and Israel, Syria gave Hezbollah 200mm rockets with 80-kilogram (176 lb) warheads with a range of 70 kilometers (almost 44 miles), and 302mm rockets with 100-kilogram (220 lb) warheads with a potential range of about 100 kilometers (about 62 miles).[34] In addition, Syria gave Hezbollah

advanced anti-tank rockets and missiles and quite probably anti-aircraft missiles as well.[35] According to some estimates, 80 percent of the 4,000 rockets fired at Israeli targets by Hezbollah during that conflict came from Syria.[36]

Although the flow of weapons from Syria to Lebanon has continued for decades, recent reports indicate that both the quantity and sophistication of the weapons systems has grown. Reports surfaced in 2010 that Syria is transferring Syrian-made M-600 missiles (a Syrian variant of the Iranian Fateh-110 missile) to Hezbollah.[37] Media reports also claimed that Syria transferred Scud D missiles to the Lebanese terrorist group as well.[38] Additionally, in March 2010, Israeli Brig. Gener. Yossi Baidatz told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Syria had transferred the *Igla*-S portable air defense system to the terrorist group.[39] Estimates of Hezbollah's current arsenal, acquired overwhelmingly thanks to Syria and Iran, is estimated at between 40,000 and 60,000 rockets.[40]

Syria continues to reassure Hezbollah that it is committed to their relationship. In a September 2008 interview with Hezbollah's *Al-Manar* television, Asad explained Syrian policy: "We don't see an interest in abandoning the resistance [i.e., Hezbollah]… Our clear position remains in all our political discourse—our steadfast position for resistance" in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine.[41] One month later, Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustapha referred to Hezbollah as a "close ally" which his country regarded with pride.[42]

Hezbollah is not the only Islamist force in Lebanon that Syria supports, however. Following the February 14, 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, both Lebanese outrage and diplomatic pressure compelled Damascus to withdraw its military presence after their 30-year occupation. Rather than allowing the Lebanese government to go its own way, the Syrian regime exerted pressure by sponsoring radical, Sunni terrorist movements. This has had the added effect of providing insurance against an ascendant Hezbollah, should a rift between the group and Damascus ever develop.

Several Sunni Islamist groups are active today in Lebanon. Much like Syria's porous border with Iraq, the regime allows certain *jihadists* free passage into Lebanon and assists Salafi Islamist parties there.[43] Sources in Beirut have accused Syrian intelligence of help-

ing to strengthen the Salafi fundamentalist group *Fatah al-Islam*, a splinter group of the Syrian-created *Fatah al-Intifada* (established in 1983 to challenge Yasser Arafat's *Fatah* movement in Lebanon).[44] Reports in the Arab press suggested that Damascus provided weapons to *Fatah al-Islam* and used the group to assassinate thirty-six people in Lebanon opposed to the Syrian regime.[45]

Fatah al-Islam was named by the U.S. as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity on August 13, 2007.[46] Its leader, Shaker al-Absi, had been acting as a Syrian agent since 1983. In 2003, Absi joined the insurgency in Iraq, where he worked with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Absi was also wanted in Jordan for the October 2002 murder of U.S. diplomat Lawrence Foley—a murder planned by the network set up in Syria by Zarqawi between May and September 2002.[47]

Nevertheless, in working to promote Salafist (Sunni) Islamism abroad when it suits the needs of the regime in Damascus, Asad has created a problem for himself. Sensing the recent weakness of the regime in light of the recent 2011 protests, *Fatah al-Islam* called for *Jihad* in Syria in a statement disseminated on *jihadist* websites. The statement was signed by Abu Huraira al-Badawi also known as Khattab al-Maqdisi and it urged Sunnis to awaken and come to the aid of their brothers in Daraa. It also called Muslims in Syria and Lebanon to come to the aid of *Fatah al-Islam* in their fight against the Shi'ite encroachment from Iran and the "Party of the Devil" (*Hizb al-Shytan*)—the term used to mock Hezbollah. It should be noted that the statement was not disseminated through an accredited account on *jihad* forums but rather by members who posted it on behalf of *Fatah al-Islam*.[48] It is therefore difficult to tell with certainty if this was a true declaration from the terrorist group purely independent of Syrian instructions or whether it was ordered by the Asad regime in its early and ongoing effort to cast the blame for the protests on Islamist elements.

Israel and the Palestinian Authority

Syria has provided training, weapons, safe haven and logistical support to both secular leftist and Islamist Palestinian hardliners. Damascus is the headquarters for Hamas' external leadership and for the far-left Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General

Command. It also hosts the headquarters of the fundamentalist Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which draws support directly from the Syrian government.[49]

Syria provides both direct and indirect sponsorship and support for Hamas, the main Palestinian Islamist movement. The leading authority of the movement is its "external" leadership, headed by Politburo chief Khalid Mishaal, which currently resides in Damascus with the permission of the Syrian regime. Damascus directs and supports Hamas by political and operational instructions, the transfer of millions of dollars per year, the training of operatives, and the provision of funds for purchasing weapons that are later smuggled into the Palestinian Authority and the Arab states.[50] This connection enables Damascus to directly influence Palestinian politics, from Palestinian Authority reconciliation efforts to the adoption of ceasefires. Moreover, in recent years, Damascus' ability to exercise direct control over the group is said to have increased.[51]

The Asad regime was quite happy with the results of the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006, which saw a Hamas victory and the formation of a Hamas-led government.[52] Since that time, Syrian activity in the Palestinian arena has increased significantly. On the political level, Damascus has stepped up its coordination with several Hamas representatives, including numerous meetings with Khalid Mishaal and meetings between Asad and senior members of the Palestinian government.[53] According to the U.S. State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008*, Mishaal's "use of the Syrian Ministry of Information as the venue for press conferences this year could be taken as an endorsement of HAMAS's message."[54]

Syria helped Hamas more directly as well. Media reports indicate that Hamas used Syrian soil to train its militant fighters.[55] The Syrian government also facilitated Palestinian conferences organized by Hamas, the PFLP-GC, and PIJ in January 2008, and another conference organized by Hamas and funded by Iran in November. With Mishaal's April 2009 reelection as leader of Hamas' Political Bureau, more Hamas leaders from Gaza traveled to Damascus for meetings and the election of a new politburo.[56]

The 2011 uprising in Syria has strained the Syrian-Hamas relationship. Reports surfaced in early May that Hamas might

be seeking another home.[57] The apparent spat came as a result of Hamas refusing to publicly condemn the protests. A senior Hamas official at a Palestinian camp near Damascus explained, "The Syrian government said to us, 'Whoever is not with us is against us.' It wants us to express clearly our position over what is going on in Syria. It wants us to be against the Syrian demonstrations. We told them we are neutral. We said to them we are living in the country as visitors and we have no right to comment or interfere in the country's problems."[58] Khalid Mishaal later dismissed rumors that Hamas was seeking to move to Qatar. Whether it is true or not, Hamas has been unwelcome in most Arab capitals and previously had little choice but to accept Syrian patronage. The "Arab Spring" opens up the possibility of creating new bases in Egypt and beyond. This would have grave consequences for the Asad regime, which views Hamas as an asset to balance the more moderate forces of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. Since Asad's regional value comes from his ability cause mischief throughout the Middle East, losing control over Hamas or Hezbollah weakens his political hand and his ability to project power across the region.

Iraq

Syria has armed, trained, financed, encouraged, and transported foreign *jihadists* to fight against Coalition forces in Iraq and against the emerging Iraqi government since Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled in 2003.[59] In Syrian terms, assisting the insurgency in Iraq is not regarded as terrorism but as legitimate resistance to U.S. occupation, and is supervised by Syria's intelligence services.[60]

The Syrian trafficking system, which accounts for a large part of the foreign *jihadist* industry, "is organized into independent rings of smugglers, generally transportation specialists who operate within a given territory and pay an established tribute to one of several officials with authority in that area."[61] The hand of the Syrian state is present throughout.

From 2003 to 2007, Syria facilitated both components of the Sunni Iraqi insurgency: the Iraqi Ba'athists and al-Qaeda in Iraq. The "New Regional Command" that was formed by former members of Hussein's regime received finances and directions from

Syria.[62] According to estimates in 2004, Syrian financing of insurgents in Ramadi reached $1.2 million per month.[63] Signs of direct Syrian operational presence were also abundant; "U.S. troops in Fallujah, for example, found a GPS system in an explosives production facility that showed routes originating in western Syria. Coalition forces also captured a GPS system that showed waypoints in Western Syria."[64] The following year, Iraq's defense minister charged that 400 detainees had trained in Syria.[65]

The foreign fighter network in Syria represented a major contributor to ongoing instability and violence in Iraq. As early as 2004, General Richard Myers, then-chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at a press conference in Baghdad, "There are other foreign fighters. We know for a fact that a lot of them find their way into Iraq through Syria for sure."[66] Other estimates suggest that as much as 80 percent of the foreign fighters who have infiltrated Iraq have come through Syria and are responsible for the most lethal suicide bombings in Iraq.[67] Indeed, an Italian investigation of foreign fighter recruitment in Italy found that "Syria has functioned as a hub for an Al-Qaeda network."[68] A large number of these foreign fighters arrived in Syria via the Damascus International Airport.[69] The flow of foreign fighters through Syrian territory reached a high of 80 to 100 a month in mid-2007 and despite repeated appeals Syria did not stem the flow of Sunni suicide bombers into Iraq.[70] 2008 showed a significant drop in the number of jihadists allowed into Iraq, but American sources claim this was the result of Iraqi and Coalition forces operating along the Syrian border—that is to say, not a result of Syrian actions.[71] Despite the short respite, in May 2009, terrorist traffic from Syria spiked again.[72] Examples of Syria's facilitation of terrorist movement into Iraq continued throughout 2010, but have dropped off substantially in 2011.[73]

This activity has created a causal connection between the Asad regime and al-Qaeda. Documents seized in a September 2007 raid on an al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) safe house in the border village of Sinjar in Western Iraq revealed that from August 2006 until August 2007 the Syrian city of Dayr al-Zawr along Iraq's border was an active and important logistics hub for fighters en route to Iraq. According to the documents, "AQI has relied on at least 95 different Syrian 'coordinators' to provide such services. Illustrating a sense of

how well organized this system was, the coordinators appeared to specialize in working with prospective foreign fighters and suicide bombers from specific locales."[74] It appears from the 606 captured personnel records that all of the listed jihadists entered Iraq from Syria and Syrians comprised the third largest nationality of foreign fighters, behind only Saudis and Libyans.[75] Indeed, the Syrians coordinated the insertion into Iraq of almost all the foreign fighters listed in the Sinjar records.[76]

Syria also allowed key al-Qaeda activists in Iraq to use its territory for weapons, supplies, and financing. This came to light in the wake of a U.S. special forces operation in the Syrian village of Sukkariyeh near the Iraq border on October 26, 2008. Abu Ghadiyah, a senior al-Qaeda operative was killed in the raid. American intelligence sources claim he had operated in Syria on behalf of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi where he smuggled money, weapons, and fighters into Iraq and he continued to do so after Zarqawi was killed in 2006.[77] "U.S. intelligence indicates that Abu Ghadiyah supplied foreign *jihadists* with false passports, trained them, provided them with safe houses, and supplied them with weapons and other supplies. The volunteers 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 in the port city of Latakia with the help of Syrian intelligence officers. After moving the volunteers into Iraq, Abu Ghadiyah would continue to see to their logistical needs."[78]

American military sources further claimed that Syria has allowed al-Qaeda operatives to train in Syria since 2003.[79] Senior American officials also claim that Syria supplies al-Qaeda in Iraq with bomb-making materials to improve the lethality of their explosives.[80]

ENDNOTES

[1] Seth Wikas, "Battling the Lion of Damascus: Syria's Domestic Opposition and the Asad Regime," Washington Institute for Near East Policy *Policy Focus* 69, May 2007, 24.

[2] "A Look at the Terror Group Jund al-Sham," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/12/AR2006091200844.html; "Jund al-Sham," globalsecurity.org, n.d., http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/jund_al-sham.htm; "Jund al-Sham," globaljihad.net, n.d., http://globaljihad.net/view_page.asp?id=230; "Qassioun Shootout," globaljihad.net, n.d., http://globaljihad.net/view_page.asp?id=1269.

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