

Terrorism: the Syrian Connection

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# Terrorism: the Syrian Connection

—Daniel Pipes—

*Terrorism is ordinary diplomatic language in the Middle East.*

—Josette Alia, *Le Nouvel Observateur*

THE BEST introduction to Syrian terrorism is the story of a single incident, the near-successful destruction of an El Al plane in April 1986. Nizar Hindawi's attempt reveals a great deal about the Syrian government's methods; it also says something about its goals.

Nizar Nawwaf al-Mansur al-Hindawi is a Jordanian of Palestinian origins. Born in 1954 in Baqura, a village near the east side of the Jordan River, he worked as a journalist in Amman before arriving in London in 1979. He initially hoped to write for the Arabic press but failed to land a steady position, partly because of a drinking problem. His extreme anti-Hashemite views also got him in trouble with the Jordanian authorities, who refused to renew his passport. Despondent, Hindawi hired himself out in the early 1980s to the Syrian government to make quick money. The Syrian ambassador to the Court of St.

James's, Lutfallah Haydar, may have been personally involved in Hindawi's recruitment.

Hindawi began by writing puff pieces on Syria. Then, in late 1985 or so, he went to Syria for two months' military training. He stayed in a camp maintained by Abu Nidal near Dahir, a town of 15,000 east of Damascus. In January 1986, Hindawi went to Damascus where he met Brigadier General Muhammad al-Khuli, the chief of air force intelligence, the head of secret operations, and a man said to have an office just down the hall from Syrian President Hafez el-Assad. He also met Khuli's three assistants: Lieutenant Colonels Haytham Sa'id, Mufid Akhur, and Samir Kukash. A deal was cut: Hindawi would attack an El Al plane and in return the Syrians would help him in his efforts against the Jordanian government. Colonel Sa'id was designated Hindawi's control officer.

At a subsequent meeting on February 9, 1986, Sa'id provided a first payment of \$12,000 (the full amount for a successful operation was scheduled to be \$250,000) and a Syrian "service" passport (an official passport good for only one trip at a time) made out in the name of 'Isam Sha'r. Hindawi then used this passport, rather than his original Jordanian one, to travel on two occasions to the United Kingdom. The Syrian Foreign Ministry backed each of Hindawi's visa applications to the British government with an official note of endorsement. According to *The Times* of Lon-

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don, the visas were granted in part through the connivance of a Syrian agent in the British embassy in Damascus. Hindawi made a dummy run to London in February, posing as a defense procurement officer wanting to buy spare parts for British Leyland Range Rovers, then returned to Damascus.

Back in Damascus he met again with Sa'id, who showed him how to prepare a suitcase bomb by placing the detonator near the main charge in a false bottom; the explosive would then combust sympathetically. In other words, neither wires nor technical competence was needed. If caught, Sa'id told him, Hindawi should not mention his Syrian connection but portray himself as a drug runner. Violation of this rule would lead to the elimination of a quarter of Hindawi's family the very next day. Lastly, Sa'id gave Hindawi his telephone number, Damascus 336-068.

Before setting out on his London business, Hindawi appears to have proven his abilities by organizing the March 29, 1986 bombing of the Berlin-based German-Arab Friendship Society, an operation carried out primarily by his brother Ahmad. Hindawi arrived in London on his new passport for a second time on April 5, on this occasion posing as a Syrian foreign ministry accountant vacationing in Great Britain. Haytham Sa'id's brother, Ghasim, accompanied him and both posed as members of the Syrian Arab Airlines flight crew.<sup>1</sup> Hindawi stayed his first two nights with the crew at the Royal Garden Hotel, in a room paid for by the airline. On April 6, he took delivery of the detonator and travel bag he was to use.

Sa'id had instructed Hindawi to use a female carrier. This was no problem, for Hindawi had already been involved since late 1984, probably under orders from Syrian intelligence, with Ann-Marie Murphy. Murphy, a tall, slim woman Hindawi's own age, was described aptly by the court prosecutor as a "simple, unsophisticated Irish lass and a Catholic." Newly arrived from Sallynoggin in South Dublin, she was working as a maid in the Hilton Hotel when she met Hindawi. Hindawi made her pregnant twice. The first

pregnancy, which occurred early in 1985, ended in miscarriage. He then disappeared between April and September 1985. She became pregnant a second time in November 1985. But before she discovered her condition, Hindawi had left the country again. When Hindawi called from Berlin in January 1986 and learned what had happened, he wanted nothing to do with it. He pressed her, rather, to abort the fetus. This she refused to do. Instead, she began making plans to return to Ireland.

Then, to her surprise, Hindawi turned up on April 7, 1986. Full of enthusiasm, he declared his love for her. The next day, he insisted on their immediately getting married and taking a honeymoon. He made plans for them to travel to "the Holy Land" and then cross to Jordan where, three days later, the ceremony would take place. But Hindawi insisted on traveling separately, saying that his employer had paid for him on a later flight. Murphy accepted all these plans unquestioningly (even that a Jordanian would return home through Israel). Hindawi demanded that she not tell anyone about their plans and got unreasonably angry on learning that she had informed two of her sisters.

He helped her prepare for the trip by paying for her passport, buying her new clothes, and giving her a ticket to fly to Israel on El Al for Thursday, April 17. (The day may have been picked because of its proximity to Passover and the greater likelihood of a full flight.) On the evening of the 16th, he brought her a wheeled suitcase, courtesy of the Syrian embassy. It contained a false bottom containing a half-inch thick sheet with 3.25 pounds of Semtex, a powerful Czech-made plastic explosive. Being almost wire-free, it was virtually undetectable by airport X-rays. According to Scotland Yard, the sophistication of this bomb almost certainly indicates it was put together in Damascus.

As he helped Murphy pack, Hindawi in-

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<sup>1</sup>That is to say, Hindawi wore a different identity for each visa application; and a third one on the second entry to Great Britain.

serted a small device in the suitcase, saying it was a calculator for a friend in Israel. In fact, while this mechanism looked like a calculator on the outside and in an X-ray inspection, it was the trigger for the suitcase bomb. The next morning, in a taxi on the way to the airport, Hindawi took the batteries out of this device and replaced them with a detonator set to go off five hours later, 1:04 p.m., GMT. He dropped Murphy at the terminal, quickly kissed her on both cheeks, and headed back for the Royal Garden Hotel, intending to pose again as a crew member on that afternoon's 2 p.m. flight back to Syria.

It was no accident that Murphy was caught. Hindawi had been under around-the-clock surveillance since March, when the British had intercepted a Syrian embassy request for more assistance for the Hindawi operation. In addition, her ticket had been re-booked, and Murphy had answered in the negative to the question of whether she had packed her bags by herself. Both of these actions trigger automatic scrutiny by El Al.

Had the bombing been successful, Hindawi would have been out of Britain that afternoon. But news of the failed attempt got out in the morning, so his intelligence escort dispatched him to the Syrian embassy. There Ambassador Lutfallah Haydar met him and complimented him on his "good work." After telephoning Damascus, Haydar had Hindawi taken out the back door to a private apartment at 19 Stonor Road in West Kensington. At the apartment, an embassy guard cut and dyed his hair; then Hindawi spent the night there. The next day, as two men were taking him back to the Syrian embassy, he bolted—preferring not to trust his fate to the tender mercies of the regime in Damascus. He fled to the London Visitors Hotel, where he knew the proprietor, who convinced Hindawi to turn himself in.

He gave the police a forthright confession. According to one account, he testified that President Assad had personally ordered the attack on the El Al plane. Hindawi then explained how Syrian Arab Airline crews brought explosives, guns, and drugs into the

United Kingdom. To prove his *bona fides*, Hindawi supplied Khuli's telephone number. Hindawi claimed he worked for the Syrians to make money and to win places for Jordanians at Syrian universities. Hindawi subsequently recanted his confession, perhaps remembering Sa'id's threat against his family.

Although Hindawi recanted, the information he gave was subsequently confirmed. Further, his capture implicated his brother and cousin. The police found the Berlin telephone number of his brother, Ahmad Nawwaf al-Mansur al-Hasi, in Hindawi's apartment. A West German court later found Hasi guilty of the March 29, 1986 explosion at the German-Arab Friendship in West Berlin that killed two. He was also implicated in the bombing a week later of La Belle Discotheque in Berlin. Hasi too worked for the Syrians: he admitted to having picked up explosives in the kitchen of the Syrian embassy in East Berlin. Then a letter Hindawi sent from jail to his cousin in Genoa, 'Awni al-Hindawi, asking him to "get the Syrians to take hostages and get him out of prison," was intercepted. 'Awni was arrested for complicity in the Berlin bombing.

It should be noted that the Assad regime was involved at every step of the operation, having trained Hindawi in Syria, provided him with a passport, supported his visa applications, disguised him as a Syrian Arab Airlines crew member, given him explosives and the bag with a false bottom, and helped him after the effort had failed. Hindawi further implicated the government by asking it to capture British hostages on his behalf. Direct participation by Damascus is somewhat unusual, but the Hindawi case typifies the Syrian use of terror in other ways—the use of a non-Syrian national; the brazen exploitation of diplomatic immunity; the use of a high technology explosive; reliance on a local female; and the operative's fear of his handlers.

There are several reasons to believe that Hafez al-Assad oversaw the London operation: in addition to Hindawi's possible testimony to this effect, it seems inconceivable that Assad would let underlings take steps which

could well have precipitated war with Israel. Muhammad al-Khuli is one of Assad's closest aides. And if the attempted bombing had been a rogue operation, would not Khuli and the others would have paid some price for having botched it? In fact, they seem to have been punished not at all.

### *Terrorism in the Context of a Foreign Policy*

**W**HY DOES the Syrian government sponsor activities like Hindawi's? How do such operations forward the state's interests? How can Damascus be induced to stop its support of terrorism?

These are complex questions, but the place to start is with a description of the Assad regime and its priorities. Since coming to power in November 1970, Assad's first goal has been to retain power. This is no easy matter, for the regime's top positions are staffed primarily by 'Alawis, members of a small and despised religious minority much resented by the Sunni Muslim majority. Because they benefit disproportionately from Assad's rule, 'Alawis fear what would happen should they lose control to the Sunnis. This fear goes far to explain the bellicose nature of Syrian foreign policy. The effort to eliminate Israel appeals to the displaced Sunnis and gives them something in common with the regime. Damascus's attempts to control the region known as Greater Syria (which includes Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan) are broadly popular. And alignment with the Soviet Union makes it easier to repress the Sunnis whenever they get out of line.

Each of these policies also implies a need for covert warfare. The Israelis are too strong to attack by conventional means, so irregular methods take their place. Greater Syria calls on irredentist efforts against Lebanon and Jordan, as well as against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The Soviet connection leads to campaigns of sabotage against Turkey and the West. Given this aggressiveness, terrorism—rather than conventional forms of

military violence—becomes a useful instrument of statecraft. It is inexpensive; it permits actions of a sort which a state could not possibly back openly; and it intimidates opponents.

In Assad's hands, terrorism has often influenced the actions of foreign states. In Lebanon, it pushed out Western and Israeli troops in 1982–84, and it helped Damascus gain and keep control over most of the country's territory. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is instrumental in preventing Arab states from adopting more accommodating policies toward Israel; specifically, it blocked King Hussein of Jordan from entering peace negotiations with Israel. In the Persian Gulf it keeps the money coming. It boosts an otherwise frail alliance with Libya and Iran. And it enhances Assad's utility as an ally of the Soviet Union.

Terror also serves more specific goals. On one occasion, in September 1986, Syrian officials offered to do what they could to curb terrorism in France—but only in return for economic aid. The spate of Syrian-backed incidents between April and September had, according to Israeli analyst Moshe Zak, two purposes: to prevent an Israeli-Egyptian-Jordanian dialogue and to eliminate Israeli influence over southern Lebanon. Further, he argues, the two are related: "Syrian intelligence seems to believe that the explosions in Paris are a good background for softening France's position on Lebanon, and for making the Elysée Palace exert pressure on Israel" to leave Lebanon.

State-sponsored terror became a significant factor a few years after Assad came to power in November 1970, and the judicious use of terrorism has been a key instrument of state ever since. Accordingly, the Syrian regime relies on this kind of warfare more than any other government. Its activities extend farther and their impact is greater than those of any other state. What is especially striking is that the regime has done all this without attracting the kind of opprobrium that attaches to the PLO, Libya, or Iran.

Syrian use of terrorism under Assad has gone through four distinct periods:

*Early 1970s–1982.* Syrian nationals participated in Damascus's operations, most of which were directed either against Israeli and Jewish targets or against Arabs. The latter included such enemies of the Syrian state as Syrian dissidents and pro-Arafat Palestinians; it also included officials of states which Damascus wanted to intimidate (such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait).

*1983–85.* Two major changes in the *modus operandi* took place in 1983, both connected to the 1982 war in Lebanon. First, the Syrian government became the international fulcrum for terrorism, having taken over this role from the PLO. In all, an estimated 3,500 desperados moved from Beirut to Damascus after late 1983. Second, the Syrian authorities began taking great pains not to use Syrian nationals in their terrorism campaigns; Syrians acted only as supervisors, while non-Syrians did the dirty work.

*1986.* During a brief period, especially in the spring of 1986, Assad directly involved his own intelligence services. At one point, one of the highest intelligence officials, Colonel Haytham Sa'id, even traveled to Berlin to oversee an operation. Despite an elaborate and cunning network, Syrian involvement was repeatedly discovered—at one point late that year, trials dealing with Syrian-sponsored terror were pending in London, Madrid, Paris, West Berlin, Genoa, Vienna, Istanbul, and Karachi. The regime became internationally notorious and eventually seems to have found the price too high. Bombs in Beirut are one thing; in Paris, quite another. Smarting from the uproar, Assad retreated to the Middle East.

*1987 to date.* Syrian activity reverted to a mix of the first and second periods. As in the first period, terror is mainly deployed in the Middle East (in Turkey and Lebanon, against Palestinians and Israelis); this keeps Damascus out of the headlines and lowers political costs. As in the second period, the regime relies mainly on proxies. After the ambitious experimentation of 1983–86, this blend seems to offer the Syrians a stable long-term approach to terrorism.

## *Patrons and Partners*

THE USSR has a major, though non-specific, role in encouraging Syrian terrorism. Soviet bloc support gives Assad the confidence to take risks, knowing that his enemies will think long and hard before taking on the missile batteries around Damascus or provoking Soviet anger. The tie with Moscow also explains such Syrian activities as its efforts to destabilize Turkey.<sup>2</sup> East German and Bulgarian "security advisers" work in some camps, while some of the leaders go to the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe to receive specialized instruction; some even know Russian or other East bloc languages.

Regionally, Damascus is affiliated with the Iranian and Libyan governments. The Iranian connection has particular importance in Lebanon. Boeing 747s belonging to the Iranian Air Force fly to Damascus carrying men, arms, and funds for Iran's operations in Lebanon. These are then taken by convoys of trucks, using military roads to avoid custom checks and border searches, to the Bika' Valley in Lebanon. Radical fundamentalist Muslim groups such as Islamic Jihad, Islamic Amal, and Hizbullah depend on this arrangement for nearly all their supplies. In return for permitting this access and providing help of its own, the Syrian government exercises a large measure of control over Iran's Lebanese allies.

Thus, in early October 1983, about three weeks before the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut were blown up, a special flight is reported to have arrived in Damascus from Tehran with fifty Iranian operatives aboard. They were immediately taken to Baalbek in Syrian-controlled Lebanon and from there found their way to Beirut. Actual planning for the attack involved both Syrian and Iranian agents. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger summed up the alliance by noting that those responsible for the Marine barracks ex-

<sup>2</sup>On this, see Adam Garfinkle, "Turkey Confronts the Syrian-Soviet Threat," *The World & I*, August 1987, pp. 95–101.

plosion were "basically Iranians with sponsorship and knowledge and authority of the Syrian government."

As for three-way cooperation, it appears that Damascus cooperates with both the Libyan and Iranian governments in backing the Abu Nidal organization. According to a pro-Syrian Palestinian, the three states find it mutually advantageous to help this group because it "provides them with an Arab force that distances them from any public responsibility."<sup>3</sup> According to an Israeli expert on terrorism, "Libya buys, stores, and distributes weapons through its pouch; Syria provides the logistical intelligence and training needed for such an attack; Iran provides the suicide commandos and some funding."<sup>4</sup>

Cooperation can be even more broadly based: some leading terrorists have a mysterious stamp on the sixth page of their passports; it shows an airplane, the date "30 Nov. 1984" and the word "Casa-Nouasseur." According to one report, this gets them in, no questions asked, to many states in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>5</sup>

While such instances of cooperation do take place, terrorism remains a highly secretive world in which states prefer to go it alone, especially on the operational level. A French-counter-espionage official likened the cooperation between terrorist groups to firms making the same product which normally compete but sometimes band together as a trade association.

In general, Assad prefers alliances with small groups that he can dominate, and these play a far larger role in Syrian terrorism than do other states.

### Organizations

MOST SYRIAN terrorism since 1983 has been undertaken by members of organizations based in Lebanon that are influenced, if not controlled, by the Syrian government. A December, 1986 Department of State report explains why:

Available evidence indicates that Syria prefers to support groups whose activities are generally in line with Syrian objectives rather than to se-

lect targets or control operations itself. 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.

In this way, Assad exerts effective control while he can simultaneously disclaim responsibility.

In addition to plausible deniability, indirect sponsorship makes it possible to add manpower and skills. The proxy groups can call on many more devoted followers than can the military dictators in Damascus. Indirect sponsorship also permits Assad to play an intermediary role. Time and again, he assumes the mantle of statesman, talking to foreign leaders about ways to win the release of their hostages or stop terrorism on their territory, a posture that not only distances Assad from terrorist groups, but protects him from the full wrath of foreigners. No state dares punish him, for no one wants to alienate this key intermediary. Assad thus maintains good relations with many leaders—even those whose citizens suffer his assaults.

Three types of organizations provide Assad with potential recruits:

*Palestinian Organizations.* After being pushed out of Lebanon in 1982, many factions of the PLO took refuge in Syria, where Assad brought them under the banner of the Palestine National Salvation Front (PNSF). The PNSF includes As-Sa'iqa, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (run by George Habash), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command (Ahmad Jibril), the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Na'if Hawatma), and Abu Musa's Fatah dissidents. Other groups include the Arab Organization of the 15th of May for the Liberation of Palestine (Naji 'Alush) and Fatah-Revolutionary Command (Abu Nidal). The Syrians wooed Abu Nidal

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<sup>3</sup>*Newsweek*, April 7, 1987.

<sup>4</sup>Unnamed specialist, quoted in the *New York Times Magazine*, January 4, 1987.

<sup>5</sup>Pictured in *L'Express*, February 27, 1987, p. 12.

from his Iraqi patrons at the end of 1979 or early 1980,<sup>6</sup> and since then he has been one of Assad's most active agents, conducting operations in almost every country of West Europe and many in the Middle East. He seems to have moved on to Libya in early 1987.

*Arab Organizations.* The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), founded in 1932, enthusiastically approves of Assad because his goals coincide with its own plans to establish a single Syrian state covering the present territories of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan. Syrian backing permits the SSNP to control a portion of Lebanese territory to the south of Tripoli. Together with the Ba'th Party of Lebanon and the Lebanese Communist Party it carried out nearly all of the fifteen suicide attacks against Israeli and South Lebanon Army troops that occurred in 1985.

Other groups include the (Druze) Progressive Socialist Party, the (Shi'i) Amal, the (Sunni) Nasirites, the Lebanese Revolutionary Brigades, the Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Fraction (FARL), Arab Egypt, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Somalia, the Eritrean Liberation Front, and Polisario. Iraqi media have portrayed the Islamic Jihad Organization in Lebanon as a "cover for [Syria's] political crimes," and this is at least partially true.

*Non-Arab Organizations.* Since about 1980, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) has received Syrian help—training bases, logistical support, and an operations center. When the group had to leave Beirut in 1982, it found new quarters in Syrian-controlled Lebanon. French intelligence is reported to believe that Damascus operates ASALA under Soviet supervision as a way of destabilizing Turkey and weakening NATO. The Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) has served as Syria's main instrument against the Turkish government. The PKK, which remains the single most likely suspect in the February 1986 assassination of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, has been called "a state within a state in Western Europe."<sup>7</sup> Mehmet Ali Ağca, the Pope's assailant, testified that he was trained in Syria as a member of the Turkish

Gray Wolves.

For operations in West Europe, Syrian agents have worked with the Red Army Faction of West Germany, Action Direct of France, the Red Brigades of Italy, the Basque ETA and the Fighting Communist Cells of Belgium. Further afield, help also goes to Zulfikar of Pakistan, the Pattani United Liberation Organization of Thailand, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam of Sri Lanka. The Japanese Red Army spokesman lives in Damascus.

Should a convicted terrorist be let out of prison, chances are good he will head for Syrian controlled territory. Within less than a month of his May 1985 release, Kozo Okamoto of the Japanese Red Army turned up in the Bika' Valley. On his release, Bruno Breguet, an associate of "Carlos," flew straight to Damascus, where he was met on arrival by Syrian authorities and whisked away. In April 1986, Frédéric Oriach of Action Direct (and said to be the "inventor" of FARL) also went straight for Syria.<sup>8</sup> "When all of these people are in town at the same time," writes G. Jefferson Price in the *Baltimore Sun*, "the lobby of the [Sheraton] hotel they favor acquires the atmosphere of a gangland meeting."

WHAT IS IN IT for these organizations? Why do they do Damascus's dirty work? The principal reason is that the Syrian state (like any other) can provide assistance to helpful groups. Benefits include international access, money, high technology, and suicide bombers.

Diplomatic immunity permits the virtually unhindered transport of weapons, explosives, special tools, and money across international boundaries. Embassies double as safe houses and, in time of crisis, serve as

<sup>6</sup>Yossi Melman, *The Master Terrorist: The True Story of Abu-Nidal* (New York: Adama Books, 1986), p. 125.

<sup>7</sup>*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 August 1988.

<sup>8</sup>Annie Laurent and Antoine Basbous, *Guerres secrètes au Liban* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 327; *Le Nouvel Observateur*, September 19, 1986; *L'Événement du Jeudi*, September 18–24, 1986.



inviolable sanctuaries. Unlike revolutionary groups, states have virtually inexhaustible amounts of money to spend on terrorism. From a state's perspective, terrorism is a very inexpensive way of waging war. Payments to operatives appear to be good but not lavish.

States have access to expensive, fragile, and restricted equipment that private groups could not hope to acquire. Syrian agents have been caught with such highly explosive substances as Czech-made Semtex H, penthrite, and trityl.<sup>9</sup> They also dispose of submachine guns, propellants, and a variety of remote-control devices. A workshop is said to exist in Damascus which specializes in the production of rigged Samsonite suitcases (which are then exchanged for those of unsuspecting passengers). States forge the passports of other states with special skill. Georges Ibrahim 'Abdallah of FARL carried no fewer than five passports (two Moroccan, an Algerian, a Maltese, and a South Yemeni).

States can provide organizations with operatives prepared for suicide. Suicide bombers have two great advantages: they tend to cause the most damage and they usually do not survive to be captured (and reveal what they know). But there are few fanatics who volunteer to give up their own lives, and this is where the state has a role. The connection between state authority and suicide may not be obvious, but it can be very direct. Governments can use their powers of coercion to pick someone and offer him a choice: "Either you die a protracted, painful, and certain death in jail, your family is harassed or killed, and your name is dragged through the mud. Or you undertake this operation, in which case you have a chance of surviving. And if you die, you go quickly, your family is rewarded, and we make you a national hero." Under such circumstances, suicide attack is a rational and prudent choice.<sup>10</sup>

### Operations

IN SYRIA PROPER, there are about twenty-five training camps for irregular warfare, five of them near Damascus. The Yarmuk camp is apparently the one most

specifically dedicated to honing terrorist skills. Other bases, including Abu Nidal's base at Hammara, operate openly in the Bika' Valley of Lebanon, an area under complete Syrian control. The training camps are supervised by the Syrian army and family members live in Palestinian camps in Damascus. A former member of Abu Nidal's group testified that the standard course of training in Iraq (which presumably resembles what is found in Syria) lasts six months. A typical day consists of a ten kilometer run, four hours of physical workout and practice on such weapons as the Kalashnikov and the W. Z. 63 machine gun, followed by classes of indoctrination. In advanced training, "we learned how to kill people with a variety of methods, how to enter buildings quietly, stalk people through the streets and then escape."<sup>11</sup>

The Syrian government usually arranges for passage from Lebanon or Syria to the site of the operation. It supplies a false passport (or two). In some cases, a Syrian intelligence (*mukhabarat*) official escorts the operative. Travel tends not to be direct: agents going to Rome, say, will go via Yugoslavia or Greece.

To gain maximum flexibility, Syrian authorities rely heavily on "sleepers," agents put in place far in advance of an operation. Sleepers commonly enroll in language school or university, an easy way to gain legal status in a foreign country, then gather information on targets and travel freely across borders. They exploit the large transient populations and easy political asylum laws of places like West Berlin. Sleepers sometimes set up two residences, one for normal life and the other as a safe house, the latter often near an airport. Lodgings sometimes multiply; police counted

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<sup>9</sup>On one occasion, a Middle East smuggler of a plastic explosive tried to prove to the police that it was an oriental cake by eating some of it! (*Le Monde*, September 10, 1986).

<sup>10</sup>This summarizes the argument in my article, "The Scourge of Suicide Terrorism," *The National Interest*, No. 4 (Summer 1986).

<sup>11</sup>Nidal Muhammad, quoted in *Newsweek*, April 7, 1986.

five apartments belonging to FARL in three West European countries. Numbered bank accounts in Switzerland are *de rigueur*. Presumably, the three SSNP members caught smuggling explosives from Canada into the United States in October 1987 were equipping a sleeper; and the same applies to Yu Kikumura, the Japanese Red Army member caught with three powerful bombs on the New Jersey Turnpike in April 1988.

The Syrians take great care to insure that they do not leave fingerprints. In some cases, they call on agents the very day of an operation or rely on "cutouts," individuals who take on a single task without knowing anything further about the operation. They also prefer to rely on the members of a single family, figuring that these are impenetrable by the police. Notable families in Syrian service include the 'Abdallahs of Lebanon and the Hindawi-Hasi clan of Jordan.

President Assad keeps personal tabs on terror operatives through his close associates. The camps and operations are under the supervision of Brigadier General Muhammad al-Khuli. On one occasion, an agent received instructions from Khuli that were signed by him personally. Control is further maintained by having operatives call the key figures in Damascus at critical moments, even from foreign countries.

The Syrian government relies on suicide squads for some of its most challenging operations. Assad delivered a remarkable speech in May 1985, telling a student audience:

I have believed in the greatness of martyrdom and the importance of self-sacrifice since my youth. My feeling and conviction was that the heavy burden on our people and nation . . . could be removed and uprooted only through self-sacrifice and martyrdom . . . Such attacks can inflict heavy losses on the enemy. They guarantee results, in terms of scoring a direct hit, spreading terror among enemy ranks, raising people's morale, and enhancing citizens' awareness of the importance of the spirit of martyrdom. Thus, waves of popular martyrdom will follow successively and the enemy will not be able to endure

them . . . I hope that my life will end only with martyrdom . . . My conviction in martyrdom is neither incidental nor temporary. The years have entrenched this conviction.<sup>12</sup>

Assad almost never brags; one may be sure that an announcement like this has an operational angle to it. Indeed, it appears that, beginning in March 1985, Assad and Khuli oversaw the training of specially picked suicide squads. Air pilots among the soldiers were trained in Lebanon and at the Minakh air base near the Turkish border.

Some details about the Syrian-sponsored suicides became known in August 1987 when an Egyptian, 'Ali 'Abd ar-Rahman Wahhaba, gave himself up to the South Lebanon Army, an Israeli-backed force. Wahhaba told the following story: He went to Lebanon in the early 1980s looking for work; there he was seized and, under repeated torture, compelled in 1984 to join a *mukhabarat*-backed group, Arab Egypt. In 1986 he underwent a two-week training course in weapons and explosives at a camp run by the chief sergeant major of Syrian intelligence in the Biq'a Valley. In January 1987 Wahhaba "was taken to Syrian television studios in Damascus, where he was given a prepared script. He was filmed saying he is going to commit suicide of his own free will in an attack against the Zionist enemy." 'Abdallah Ahmar, second in command in the Syrian Ba'th party, oversaw the filming; later, General Ghazi Kan'an, the head of the *mukhabarat* in Lebanon, personally sent him off on a mission and blessed his undertaking. In the end, Wahhaba did not explode the eleven kilograms of TNT hidden in his jacket, but gave himself up to the South Lebanon Army.<sup>13</sup>

Inexpensive as it is, training camps, special weapons, sleepers, and intelligence agents do drain the depleted resources of the Syrian government, so special financing is needed. The Syrians engage in various forms of creative funding: arms-peddling, drug-running, car-stealing, "protecting" merchants, and ex-

<sup>12</sup>Radio Damascus, May 4, 1985.

<sup>13</sup>Radio Jerusalem, September 4, 1987.

torting from the Arab oil-states. Some countries even use student funds for this purpose; between 1976 and 1978, Iraqi scholarships money to Palestinian students in Europe went through Abu Nidal, and he used his position to win such services from them as buying an apartment, renting a car, moving a suitcase, or sheltering a stranger.<sup>14</sup>

### Victims

THE RECORD SHOWS that while the Syrian regime will exploit any locale, their targets remain almost always the same—Jordanians, Lebanese, Palestinians on the one hand, Israelis, Jews, Americans, and Britons on the other. (See the tables for a statistical summary of the 1983–86 period.) Jordanians have suffered far more from Syrian aggression than any other people. Jordan was also the site of the greatest number of incidents, followed closely by Greece and Italy. But Greeks and Italians were never the intended victims. On the other hand, while only three incidents took place in Israel, Israelis and Jews suffered from nine attacks.

The Syrian regime pursued many of its opponents abroad. Muhammad 'Umrān, a prominent Syrian politician during the 1960s, lived in Tripoli, Lebanon, after 1967; he was assassinated on March 4, 1972. Evidence at the scene indicated Syrian government complicity. Salah ad-Din al-Bitar, one of the founders

Table I  
Identity of Intended Victims  
1983–86

18	Jordanians
9	Israelis & Jews
8	Americans
7	<i>Arafat's</i> PLO
6	Britons
1	Kuwaitis
<i>Summary</i>	
26	Arab
23	Western & Israeli

Table II  
Locations of Syrian Terror  
1983–86

11	Jordan
8	Greece
7	Italy
4	Turkey
	Cyprus
3	Spain
	Israel
1	West Germany
	United Kingdom
	Austria
	Netherlands
	Portugal
	Romania
	Kuwait
	U.A.E.
	India
<i>Summary</i>	
23	Western Europe
13	Arab Middle East
11	Non-Arab Middle East
1	Eastern Europe
1	India
24	Europe
24	Middle East
1	Elsewhere

Source: "Syrian Support for International Terrorism: 1983–86," *Department of State Bulletin*, February 1987, pp. 75–76. Being a U.S. government report, this document errs on the conservative side. For example, it ascribes none of the PKK activities to Syrian sponsorship.

of the ruling Ba'th Party, founded a journal in Paris, *Al-Ibya' al-'Arabi*, in which he denounced the misdeeds of the Assad regime. In July 1980, after calling on Syrians to overthrow Assad, Bitar was killed in a Parisian garage. Although the French government made no formal charges, Syrian opposition groups attributed the crime to the military

<sup>14</sup>*Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 7, 1986.

attaché of the Syrian embassy in Paris, Colonel Nadim 'Umran, an 'Alawi.

Four days after Bitar's death, Assad announced that "all those who oppose the regime will be annihilated . . . . We will pursue them everywhere."<sup>15</sup> In keeping with this threat, Syrian assassins attacked a leader of the Muslim Brethren, 'Isam 'Attar, in March 1981 in his house in Aachen, West Germany. He was not at home and so survived, but his wife was killed. Other dissidents were killed by hit squads in West Germany, France, Yugoslavia, and Spain.

Arafat's wing of the PLO has been attacked on a number of occasions. Either Abu Nidal or the PNSF assassinated a number of Arafat's men in Europe, including Na'im Khadir in Brussels, Majid Abu Sharar in Rome, and 'Isam Sartawi in Lisbon. A Palestinian with close ties to Arafat who edited an anti-Syrian weekly in Athens was shot three times from a yard away as he left his apartment building in September 1985. Two Palestinian groups based in Damascus claimed responsibility for the March 1986 assassination of Zafir al-Masri, the newly-appointed mayor of Nablus; in the West Bank itself, however, many residents accused Syrian operatives of the crime.

Lebanese leaders who resist Assad's wishes also find themselves targeted. Kamal Jumblatt, the Druze and leftist chief in Lebanon, was killed in March 1977 to silence his outspoken criticism of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon. Fearful that Bashir Gemayel would draw the Lebanese government closer to Israel, Damascus had the SSNP kill him in September 1982. In February 1988 security men found half a kilo of sophisticated explosives on a plane used by Bashir's brother Amin Gemayel, the president of Lebanon. Immediately after the discovery, Syrian intelligence officers at the Beirut airport moved in, seized the explosive, and refused to let it go.

Lebanese journalists have also suffered Syrian violence. Salim al-Lawzi, publisher of the important Lebanese magazine *Al-Hawadith*, had acquired embarrassing information about internal conditions in Syria; in re-

sponse, Syrian agents tortured and killed him in February 1980. A few months later, Riyad Taha, president of the Lebanese Publishers Association, was gunned down from a car.

Nowhere, however, is the impact of Syrian terrorism so great as it is upon the Jordanian government. The entire Syrian-Jordanian relationship is dominated by the threat of covert violence from Syria. One round of attacks began in late 1983: the Jordanian ambassador in India was shot on October 25; the next day the ambassador to Italy was wounded; in Greece a security agent was killed in November; and in Spain on December 29, one embassy employee was killed and another wounded by submachine fire. Abu Nidal's group—then based in the Rukn ad-Din quarter of Damascus—was implicated in all of these crimes.

The attacks then abated, only to begin again when King Hussein and Yasir Arafat agreed on February 11, 1985 to work together, a pact strongly opposed by the Syrian and Soviet governments. Eleven days later, a four-month sequence of terrorism began. It included a bomb at the American Research Center in Amman; an explosion in an airliner of the Jordanian carrier, Alia; a hand grenade attack on Alia offices in Athens; a rocket attack on the Jordanian embassy in Rome; a rocket attack on an Alia plane in Athens; an Alia plane hijacked in Beirut and blown up; a bomb attack on Alia offices in Madrid; and the assassination in Turkey of a Jordanian diplomat who also happened to be the brother-in-law of the Jordanian commander-in-chief.

This campaign put Amman under siege. To end the assault, King Hussein in November 1985 wrote an astonishing letter to his prime minister. In it, he admitted that the Muslim Brethren who had been attacking the Assad regime had long been based in Jordan—something he had hitherto not realized! "I was deceived . . . . Suddenly the truth was revealed

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Charles Saint-Prot, *Les Mystères syriens: La Politique au Proche-Orient de 1970 à 1984* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1984), p. 14.

and we discerned what we had been ignorant of. We came to know that some of those who had something to do with what had taken place in Syria in terms of bloody acts were among us [in Jordan].”<sup>16</sup> The camps were closed forthwith, Assad was appeased, a Syrian-Jordanian reunion came to pass, and Syrian terror against Jordan stopped. In February 1986, Hussein abrogated his accord with the PLO. The Jordanian example suggests one way for a target to shake the Syrian menace—surrender.

Of course, the Syrian regime targets Israelis and Westerners too. The French ambassador to Lebanon, Louis Delamare, was killed on September 4, 1981, less than a week after arranging a meeting between Yasir Arafat and the French foreign minister, Claude Cheysson. Although the French government—ever solicitous of Assad’s feelings—did not directly charge Damascus with responsibility, it did leak information to Michel Honorin, a reporter for the TF1 television network. With this evidence, Honorin conclusively established Syrian complicity in a television program which aired on April 21, 1982. The very next morning, bombs went off at the offices of *Al-Watan al-‘Arabi*, an Iraqi-backed weekly based in Paris. (It had also published embarrassing information on the February 1982 massacre at Hama.) By noon, the French government decided to expel the Syrian cultural and military attachés, Michel Kasuha and ‘Ali Hasan (an ‘Alawi).

Syrian operatives have repeatedly assaulted Americans in Lebanon. The U.S. ambassador, Francis E. Meloy Jr., was killed in June 1976 by Palestinians working for Syria. A Syrian intelligence officer, Lieutenant Colonel Diyab, met with agents one or two days in advance to plan the October 23, 1983 destruction of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Among those in attendance were several members of Syrian-run Palestinian organizations, including Ahmad Hallaq and Billal Hasan from As-Sa’iqa and Ahmad Qudura from Abu Musa’s group.

After filing stories about unrest in Syria, Reuters correspondent Berndt Debusmann

was shot in the back by a gunman firing a silencer-equipped pistol. BBC correspondent Tim Llewellyn was threatened by Syrian agents and fled Beirut before being harmed, as did CBS correspondent Larry Pintak. Even scholars have been targetted. One of the French hostages in Lebanon, Michel Seurat (pen name: Gérard Michaud), had written a major study on decision-making in Syria which emphasized the role of ‘Alawis and the opposition of the Muslim Brethren. According to the Paris-based magazine, *At-Tali’a al-‘Arabiya*, Assad took offense at this analysis and had Seurat executed in March 1986.

### *Dealing with Damascus*

THERE ARE FOUR major sponsors of terrorism in the Middle East: the PLO, Libya, Iran, and Syria.<sup>17</sup> While the first two attract most attention, they in fact have a record of ineffectiveness. Despite nearly two decades of intensive terrorism, neither the PLO nor Libya has attained any of its goals. Iran and Syria have been engaged for shorter periods, but they have had much greater effect, for their rulers use terror not as a way to kill indiscriminately but as a means toward a specific end. Assad does not boast or indulge in media spectacles, and he always attends carefully to timing. He acts with secrecy and pays close attention to his public reputation, not wanting to be seen as a sponsor of terrorism. Assad’s hallmark is the closely calculated, low key, and far-sighted use of terror. There is an inverse proportion between extremism and efficacy: Qaddafi is the most extreme and least successful, and Assad the least extreme and most successful.

Nonetheless, the Syrians manage to avoid the consequences of their actions. This is due to several factors. First, efforts to leave no “return address” have worked, for although

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<sup>16</sup>Amman Television, November 10, 1985.

<sup>17</sup>The comparison of these four sponsors is more fully elaborated in my forthcoming article in *Terrorism*, “Why Asad’s Terror Succeeds and Qadhdhafi’s Does Not.”

everyone knows that the Syrians are deeply complicit in terrorism, time and time again governments shy away from directly blaming Damascus. Thus, in May 1986, at the height of Syrian activities, the White House spokesman called it "premature" to judge Syrian complicity in terrorism, saying the evidence was not "conclusive." Even though the Italian minister of the interior acknowledged having documents "proving that Syria is not innocent," an Italian magistrate ignored highly incriminating circumstantial evidence of an official Syrian role in the December 1985 Rome airport massacre; his reluctance to issue a warrant was explained on the basis of insufficient evidence to make a case in court. Off-the-record, French officials in 1986 called Syrian responsibility "virtually a certainty," but they did not say so in public.

Second, the Syrians have been singularly successful at getting the credit for uncovering and returning hostages that their own proxies and allies captured in the first place. Gérard Michaud explained how this is done: "The victim disappears without the authors of the kidnapping claiming responsibility for their act or identifying themselves; then the victim reappears one happy hour—like a white rabbit produced from the hat of the Syrian information service."<sup>18</sup> Western officials often travel to Damascus to seek Assad's aid in reducing terrorism. In one case, Spanish authorities passed on to the Syrians copies of the "false but genuine" Syrian passports belonging to the two culprits in an attack at Madrid airport! In another instance, David Dodge, former acting president of the American University of Beirut, was kidnapped in Lebanon but spent part of his captivity in Iran. To get from one state to the other he had to be taken through Syria—which could only be done with Damascus' permission. After his release by the Syrian authorities, the White House expressed "gratitude" to Hafez al-Assad and his brother Rif'at for their "humanitarian" efforts.

Third, cries of indignation swell up in Damascus whenever foreign governments (including the West German, Italian, British,

and American) point to Damascus as a major sponsor of terrorism. With one voice, President Assad and his aides reply that they are the victims, not the perpetrators of terror. They even claim that they bear no more responsibility for terror than do the Italian authorities for the Red Brigades. The brother of the president has dismissed terrorism as "cowardly, disgusting, and revolting." The Information Minister has declared that "We do not maintain any relations with groups such as that of Abu Nidal." Syrian radio echoed: "Syria is among the countries that has condemned, denounced, and resisted terrorism."

Fourth, little Syrian-sponsored terror, unlike that of Libya or the PLO, is directed against U.S. nationals. Rather than randomly attack Americans, Assad pursues the more comprehensive goal of sabotaging U.S. policy in the Middle East. This makes him more of a menace but emotionally less of a target. Finally, the Syrian government is a tough, strong ally of the Soviet Union. Even the Israelis think twice before tangling with Damascus.

State-sponsored terrorism is the dominant form of terrorism today. The U.S. Department of State reports that "almost half the terrorist casualties suffered in 1983 were linked in a broad sense to state involvement in terrorism." According to a press report, the Quai d'Orsay concluded that every case of Middle East terrorism in West Europe has been "propped up" by Damascus, Tripoli, or Tehran.

The involvement of Syria and other states means that the old argument about injustice and political frustration lying at the source of the violence is now completely untenable. "In other words," Thomas L. Friedman observes, "the root causes of a significant portion of today's terrorism seem to lie not in any particular grievance that can be treated, but in

<sup>18</sup>Gérard Michaud [Michel Seurat], "Terrorisme d'Etat, terrorisme contre l'Etat: Le cas syrien," *Esprit*, October-November 1984, p. 195. On Seurat, see above.

the intrigues, power struggles, jealousies and machinations that are part of the web of international relations."<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the phenomenon will not go away with a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, for much of Syrian-backed terrorism has nothing to do with this conflict. Indeed, terrorism connected to Israel is intended not to further a peaceful settlement but to block one. As soon as the Arab-Israeli peace process makes progress, Damascus goes into action. Assad is not protesting the lack of progress in negotiations with Israel but attempting to

block negotiations altogether. "Sadly," as Barry Rubin notes, "the more the United States pushes for peace, the more terrorism will increase."<sup>20</sup>

State-sponsored terrorism is a form of warfare. Accordingly, efforts to reduce its incidence must lead its victims to go beyond police measures and begin to take more comprehensive political and military steps.

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<sup>19</sup>*The New York Times*, April 28, 1986.

<sup>20</sup>*The New Republic*, June 2, 1986.