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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

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Third public hearing of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

Statement of Murhaf Jouejati to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States July 9, 2003

Syria, according to the US State Department, is a sponsor of terrorism. Indeed, Syria hosts a number of militant anti-Israel Palestinian groups and provides moral and logistical support to the Lebanese resistance group Hizbullah.

Syria considers these groups as legitimate national resistance groups struggling to end Israel's illegal occupation of their lands. Therein lies one of the great irritants in US-Syrian relations. In addition to generating pressure against Syria's Israeli archrival, the militant Palestinian groups have historically served to check Yasser Arafat's independent-minded mainstream Fatah faction. More specifically, Syria used these groups as leverage against

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Arafat in order to prevent him from adopting a separate stance that might, according to Syrian thinking, weaken the Arab front against Israel. Alternatively, Damascus used these groups to derail diplomatic initiatives that failed to take Syrian interests -- the recovery of the Golan Heights -- into account. Moreover, evidence suggests that last summer Syrian border guards turned a blind-eye to the infiltration of some Palestinian militants into the Israeli-occupied West Bank via Jordan.

The nature of Syria's assistance

With regard to militant Palestinian groups, Damascus has consistently claimed that they maintain nothing more than "press offices" in Syria. Since the meeting between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Syrian President Bashar Assad in Damascus last month, it appears as though Syrian authorities satisfied one of Washington's demands by closing down some or all of these "offices." To put it more precisely, it appears as though leaders of the Syria-based militant Palestinian groups moved out of Syria voluntarily (into neighboring Lebanon) in order to save Syria's face and to alleviate the recent anti-Syrian pressures emanating from Washington.

Whether the closure is temporary or permanent is a matter of speculation, but in the past, Syria did provide safe haven to these groups, in part to advance Syria's own objectives vis-à-vis Israel, and in part to nurture its Arab nationalist credentials. While there is no evidence that Syria provides material or financial assistance to these groups, the hypothesis according to which Syria allows them to engage in business and other money-making activities to finance and sustain their operations is plausible.

Having said that, Syria has consistently denied militant Palestinian groups the right to use Syrian territory as a base from which to launch

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operations against Israel. This policy is part and parcel of Syria's broader policy of scrupulously adhering to the terms of the disengagement and cease-fire agreements with Israel that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brokered in 1974. Other than militant Palestinian groups, Syria does not permit any politically-motivated organization to operate on its soil.

With regard to Hizbullah, Syria maintains relations with that group from a distance. There are no known Hizbullah offices, training camps, or military bases in Syria. Hizbullah operates from bases in the south of Lebanon. However, although Syrian officials deny assisting Hizbullah (other than providing moral support), evidence suggests that Syria has served on occasion as a conduit for Hizbullah-bound arms and equipment supplied by Iran. Having said that, while Syria does have some influence over Hizbullah (Damascus can cut-off the supply route at will), the degree of this influence seems to be highly exaggerated. Hizbullah enjoys a fairly high degree of autonomy. At any rate, the degree of Iranian influence over Hizbullah seems to be greater than that of Syria.

In sum, while Syria harbors groups that Washington views as "terrorist," Syrian support to these groups is neither material nor financial, but rather political and logistical. Moreover, Syria does not support any armed group outside the Arab-Israeli theatre.

Simultaneously, and in tandem with its logistical support to anti-Israel groups, Syria has been, since the tragedy of September 11, one of Washington's closest partners in the war on international terrorism, specifically against al-Qaeda.

Syrian cooperation against al-Qaeda

Syria has been "completely cooperative" in investigating al-Qaeda and persons associated

with that organization, according to a senior CIA official. That cooperation was highlighted by the revelation last year that Syria "saved American lives," according to Richard W. Erdman, the chief State Department specialist for Syria. Indeed, Syrian security services tipped off the CIA in the spring of last year of an impending al-Qaeda attack against the administrative unit of the fifth fleet headquarters in Bahrain. If successful, the operation would have killed a large number of American troops. In addition, Syrian intelligence tipped off Canadian and US authorities of a planned al-Qaeda attack against Canadian government institutions.

Syrian cooperation was also highlighted by an earlier revelation that a key figure in the September 11 plot, Mohammad Haydar Zammar, had been arrested in Morocco and sent to Syria for interrogation, with American knowledge. Although US officials have not been able to interrogate Zammar, Americans have submitted questions to the Syrians.

Furthermore, Damascus provided information on September 11 hijacker Mohammed Atta, an Egyptian citizen who worked on an engineering project in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo in the mid-1990s. Damascus also supplied information on Ma'mun Darkazanli, a Syrian businessman who allegedly served as a financial conduit to al-Qaeda members and prayed in the same mosque in Hamburg, Germany, as did Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi, who piloted the hijacked planes that blew up the World Trade Center. Darkazanli also allegedly managed the bank accounts of Mamdouh Salim, a top al-Qaeda member awaiting trial in the US on charges of participating in the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in Africa.

Moreover, Syrian officials have avoided arresting suspects so they can continue to monitor their conversations and movements and report back to the United States.

What accounts for Syrian cooperation?

The Syrian government is cooperating with the US in the war against al-Qaeda in part to highlight the distinction between "terrorism" and "legitimate national resistance to foreign occupation."

Syrian cooperation also has to do with the Syrian regime's own problems with militant Islamic fundamentalism. Syria, a secular state, was the first victim of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Syria's Muslim Brotherhood sought to destabilize and unseat the Hafez Assad regime through political assassinations and urban guerilla warfare. The fight between the Assad regime and the fundamentalist movement reached its peak in February 1982 when Islamic militants seized the city of Hama and urged the people to rise in "holy Jihad" against Assad's Alawi minority rule. That crisis culminated in the Hama massacre, costing the lives of thousands of people.

In light of this, the Syrian regime has every interest in quashing the re-emergence of Islamic fundamentalist fervor. Thus, following September 11, Gen. Bahgat Sleiman, Syria's chief of security, is said to have prohibited Islamic preachers from using language (during Friday sermons) that might incite the crowds to support militant Islam.

Finally, by cooperating with the US against al-Qaeda, the Bashar Assad administration wants to curry favor with Washington so as to improve bilateral US-Syrian relations and to benefit from that improvement if and when Syrian-Israeli peace talks resume.

What can change Syria's behavior?

A historical analysis of Syria's external behavior shows that pressure against Syria does not

always work. When Syria feels external political pressure, it generally runs in the other direction. The US-Israel strategic alliance in the early 1980s pushed Damascus into the Soviet embrace. The Turkish-Israeli alliance of 1996 drew Syria closer to Iraq. US pressure now might throw Syria further into Iranian arms.

Nor does economic pressure do much good either as Syria, which has extensive trade ties with Europe, is set to become an EU partner in 2010. While the US can threaten Syria with military action if Damascus does not desist (as it did during the Iraq War), the threat of military action will yield only temporary and unsatisfactory results.

Rather, in order to change Syria's behavior, the US, while maintaining an assertive tone vis-à-vis Damascus, must also provide carrots: a balanced approach to peace-making in the Middle East. In this regard, Washington needs to show that it is determined to help solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, first, by including Syria and Lebanon in current attempts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (the Roadmap), and second, by demonstrating that Washington will lean on all the parties, including Israel, to abide by the terms of relevant UN Security Council land-for-peace Resolutions. According to senior Syrian officials, if Israel were made to implement its share of the land-for-peace equation, namely the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the territories it has occupied since 1967, Syria would, in addition to normalizing diplomatic and other relations with the Jewish state, disband all anti-Israel groups.

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