

3 Syria as a State Supporter of PVMs

Following Syria's altercation with Jordan in the late 1960's, the principal target of Syrian-supported political violence movements was Israel. The rationale for Syria's strategy of indirect, proxy warfare against Israel may be sought in the outcome of the Middle East war in 1967, although Syria's policy of supporting Palestinian militants predates this conflict. After June 1967, "[t]he Ba'thi regime continued to glorify the Palestinian guerillas, whose reputation had been enhanced as a consequence of the regular Arab armies' defeat."²⁰⁷

With one avenue of attack closed to the Syrians through the Golan because of Israel's victory in the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, and due to its subsequent annexation (1981) resulting in a de facto border (enshrined in the preceding Israeli-Syrian armistice of 1974), Hafez al-Asad had to turn to an alternative. But another opportunity for offensive action had been severely curtailed by the unwritten terms of the "Red Line" Agreement with the U.S. and Israel after the Syrian invasion of Lebanon in 1976, which barred Syrian forces from crossing into southern Lebanon. Thus, first Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and in later years the Shi'ites of the south were instrumentalized by the Syrian regime as pawns in its clandestine war on Israel.

Syria's management of its proxy warfare capability is highly sophisticated, and further suggests the level of control it exerts vis-à-vis its clients is considerable and probably exceeds that of its partner, Iran, by a generous margin. The operationalization of the Palestinian and Lebanese Shi'ite terror weapons only became feasible because of Syria's dominion over Lebanon after 1976.

Syrian occupation of most Lebanese territory, since the early 1970's, had enabled it to dictate to the many terrorist organizations there how and when to operate. The Syrian military presence in Lebanon has also made it possible for Syria to provide organizations under its influence with military and strategic backing; intervene in disputes between organizations; penalize organizations or leaders who have deviated from the standards

207 Rabil, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

set by Syria; and carry out terrorist attacks against Israel, not originating from the Israeli-Syrian border in the Golan Heights.²⁰⁸

After 1982, the utility of Fatah and its allies within the PLO as a ready tool of Syrian designs against Israel declined and, following the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon, in fact became a liability. Syria's momentary, and indubitably politically motivated, aloofness contributed to the PLO's expulsion a year later. In its place, the initially Iranian-inspired and supported Shi'ite Hezbollah assumed the position of *primus inter pares* among those Lebanese political violence movements that were sustained from within the confines of the Iranian-Syrian strategic partnership. Although Hezbollah is usually associated with Iranian patronage, Magnus Ranstorp reminds us that "Syria remained in firm control over Iran's access to Lebanon in terms of numbers and frequency of visits, as the Pasdaran was dependent on being inserted to the Biq'a [i.e. Beqaa Valley] via Syria."²⁰⁹

Following a period of initial cooperation between 1982 and 1985, the Iranian-Syrian joint support for Hezbollah entered into a phase of rivalry in the years 1985–1992 over the escalation of the group's activity in southern Lebanon that betrayed Syria's momentary lack of control over its client, and because of the hostage crisis in 1986/1987 that compelled Syria to reign in Hezbollah by force of arms. In Tehran, Syria's fettering of Hezbollah was perceived as too conciliatory toward the West. Conversely, Syria feared a massive Israeli intervention due to provocations by Hezbollah that was incompatible with Syria's long-term objective of consolidating its power in Lebanon without any outside interference. In line with Hezbollah's reorientation toward "Lebanonization," the period between 1992 and 2003 has in equal measure seen the increasing "Syrianization" of Hezbollah. On the one hand, Hezbollah has remained strongly committed to Iran's revolutionary values. On the other hand, "Hezbollah's willingness to relegate virtually complete authority over its military operations to Damascus over the last year [2002] has coincided with an unprecedented degree of political backing for the Syrian occupation."²¹⁰

208 Boaz Ganor, "Syria and Terrorism," *op. cit.*, p. 1.

209 Ranstorp, *Hiz'Ballah in Lebanon*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

210 Gambill and Abdelnour, "Hezbollah: Between Tehran and Damascus," *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Certainly since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifadah in October 2003, Syria has supported the coalescence of its clients' resources, and the expansion of PVM operations from Lebanese staging areas and its disputed border with Israel to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Syria's clientele is without equal among other states listed as supporting political violence movements by the U.S. State Department: "[S]even of the twenty-eight terrorist groups cited in *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000* receive some level of sponsorship and support from Syria... since September 11, no fewer than five Damascus-based organizations... have undertaken operations, from suicide bombings to assassinations, resulting in the deaths of dozens of civilians and an Israeli cabinet minister."²¹¹

In line with Syria's time-honored practice of shaping its tools of proxy warfare, the Alawite regime in Damascus has in the recent past embarked upon a strategy of engineering cooperation and instigating disagreement among Syria's clients in the manner that best suits its policy objectives with a view to carrying on its conflict with Israel. Between late 2000 and 2003, Syria has consolidated its support for, and incrementally enhanced the capabilities of, the PIJ, Hamas, Ahmed Jibril's PFLP-GC, Hezbollah and, to a lesser extent, the DFLP. For example, Damascus has, with the assistance of Tehran, actively supported the convergence of PIJ and Hamas in the framework of the Alliance of Palestinian Forces, which emerged as a rejectionist reaction to the Oslo Accords.

According to a report issued in October 2001 by Jibril Rajoub, a security chief with the PA, "intensive meetings are being held in Damascus, in which leaders of the Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front and the Hezbollah take part, in an attempt to increase joint activities 'inside,' with financial support from Iran."²¹² "Inside" in this context is to mean within the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, whereas "outside" refers to the Palestinian extremists active beyond the Palestinian territories. Concerning Hamas, "Syrian sponsorship has fueled its willingness to kill, by weakening the internal leadership of Hamas vis-à-vis the external leadership, making the group's military cells less responsive to public disaffection with the costs of terror."²¹³

211 Levitt, "Syrian Sponsorship of Global Terrorism: The Need for Accountability," p. 3.

212 Levitt, "Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Islamic Jihad," *op. cit.*, p. 3.

213 Gambill, "Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas," *op. cit.*, p. 1.

In terms of its operational independence, the recent outfitting of the PFLP-GC with tanks by the Syrian army puts it on a par with its sister Palestinian organization, al-Saiqa, which has become largely interoperable with Syrian forces. The PFLP-GC's proximity to the Asad regime also suggests that it acts on Syria's direct orders, for example by ensuring the influx of arms into the Palestinian territories, as evidenced by the Israeli intercepts of the "Calypso-2" and the "Santorini." The return of the PFLP-GC to the center stage of Syrian supported political violence movements after a prolonged period in the doldrums, coupled with its role as Syria's purveyor of arms and its active support for the second Intifadah from Damascus, strongly suggest that the new Syrian government under Bashir al-Asad is intensifying its use of the terror weapon.²¹⁴ Currently, the sustained levels of violence maintained along Israel's northern border and within the Gaza Strip and the West Bank largely confirm this conclusion.

A summary review of the uses of political violence movements and terrorism in the military strategy of Syria concludes that its rationale rests on five pillars: First to sap the IDF's resources and undermine the readiness of its preparedness in case of a war between Israel and Syria; second, undermining the Israeli civilian population's morale, especially that of the denizens of northern Israeli towns; third, the destruction of Syria's enemies in its Arab-Palestinian sphere of influence; fourth, the promotion of Syria's long-term objective of uniting Lebanon, Jordan and the Syrian homeland in the shape of a "Greater Syria;" and, finally, the sabotage of a comprehensive Israeli-Arab settlement for the benefit of Syria's specific requirements in the context of the Israeli-Syrian negotiation track, as well as enforcing discipline among Arab states prepared to deviate from the path of violent confrontation with Israel.²¹⁵ In a nutshell, "[t]he central reason for Syria's support for terrorism is the wide gap between the far-reaching ambitions of the Syrian regime to achieve regional hegemony... and to play a leading role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and

214 Gambill, "Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and the PFLP-GC," *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 5.

215 Ganor, "Syria and Terrorism," p. 2.

the objective limitations and weaknesses of the Syrian state.”²¹⁶ Thus, Syria’s preference for the terror weapon in its foreign policy is directly linked to its military inferiority vis-à-vis regional powers opposed to it, in this case Turkey and Israel, and the circumstance that these two rivals also restrict Syria’s territorial ambitions, and may well compromise its interests in disputed areas.

3.1 Syrian State Institutions Tasked with Implementing Policy Involving PVMs in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories

Syria’s principal font of support for terrorism – from the planning stages to its implementation is what has been referred to as the “Mukhabarat state” – an iconic description of the de facto repressive, praetorian regime prevalent in many Arab countries, not only in Syria. To the extent that it can be portrayed, the Syrian Mukhabarat is an amalgam of closely interlocking intelligence services in a state of centrally directed, internecine contention, and constant jockeying for prevalence among its multiple agencies. Asad senior and junior have for years dexterously played off one service against another in order to cement the presidential power base within the Ba’athi apparatus. But even in this condition of flux, certain structural characteristics are discernible, albeit without any finality.

The three principal services are the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) and the Air Force Intelligence Service (AIS), all of which are nominally subordinate to the Presidential Security Council. The Syrian GID, with its principal instrument of control, the Political Security Directorate (PSD), is tasked with the charge of internal security and hence is responsible for keeping tabs on the Ba’ath party and enforcing conformity in its ranks; it keeps watch over the civilian segment of the Syrian governmental apparatus, and employs wide-ranging networks of informers that are embedded in the populace. This agency also directs both the police forces and the border guards. The GID’s role in the support for terrorist acts is auxiliary, as, for example, when it

216 Erlich, “Terrorism as a Preferred Instrument of Syrian Policy,” p.5. N.B. The reference refers to Dr Erlich’s revised paper published by the International Policy Institute for Counter Terrorism.

permits the transit of weapons for Hezbollah to pass through Syrian-controlled territory; or, as a more recent example tellingly illustrates, when Syrian border guards abet the passage of busloads full of fighters for Saddam Hussein's resistance, the Fedayeen Saddam, against the Coalition forces, and permit them to pass the Syrian-Iraqi border despite contrary promises made to the U.S.²¹⁷

The AIS is the Syrian intelligence service that has in the past been directly associated with Hafez al-Asad's office. Covert, foreign operations are usually planned and carried out by the AIS. During the Cold War, the AIS was implicated in an attempt to detonate an explosive device aboard an El Al passenger airliner due to take off from London-Heathrow in 1986. Following the severance of diplomatic relations by Britain, the mastermind of this operation, General al-Khuli of the AIS, was elevated to the position of deputy commander of the Syrian Air Force and continued to work with the AIS in his capacity of chairman of the Syrian National Security Council. The Syrian NSC operates under the direct leadership of the presidential office. Further incidents traced back to the AIS are the attack in March 1986 on the West German-Arab Friendship Association in Berlin, and the bombing a month later of a German discotheque – “La Belle” – a venue frequented by U.S. servicemen. The explosive charge for the “La Belle” attack was procured by the Syrian embassy in East Berlin; the perpetrators were trained in a facility run by the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) in the environs of Damascus.²¹⁸

The principal Syrian institution engaged in the support of political violence movements, however, is the MIS, and even more than any other Syrian agency, its branch in Lebanon is the pivotal cultivator of political violence movements in the Middle East. The MIS is the current manifestation of its progenitor, the post-World War II, French-inspired Deuxième Bureau. Syrian-occupied Lebanon constitutes the most significant staging area for Syria's covert warfare against Israel and Arab rivals in the area: It is largely an MIS fiefdom run by Damascus's local strongmen out of Beirut and the Beqaa. Unlike the other two intelligence services, unconventional warfare operations

217 “Syria's Pivotal Role in Iraqi Resistance Is Glossed Over in Washington,” Special Military Report, *Debka File*, 15 June 2003 at www.debka.com/article_print.php?aid=506 accessed on 15 December 2003. Cf. Abdelnour, “Syria's Proxy Forces in Iraq,” *op. cit.*, pp. 1–2.

218 Ganor, “Syria and Terrorism,” *op. cit.*, p. 7.

fall into the MIS's purview, and, yet again, nowhere more so than in Syrian-occupied Lebanon.²¹⁹ The recently promoted head of the MIS subsidiary in Lebanon, Major-General Ghazi Kanaan, although not a member of the Asad clan himself, because of his family's long-standing alliance with the ruling house, is an integral part of the Alawite ruling clique. The centrality of Kanaan's role in the suborning of loyalist Lebanese Forces as a precursor to the sponsorship and instrumentalization of political violence movements in the service of Syria's foreign policy, and at the expense of Lebanon's sovereignty, is attested to by Daniel Nassif, who relates that

Kanaan's most significant achievement during the 1980's was his successful effort to lure collaborators within the predominantly Christian (and ostensibly anti-Syrian) Lebanese Forces (LF) militia. This process began in 1985 with the defection to Syria of LF Commander Elie Hobeika (notorious for the 1982 massacre of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila) and culminated with the decision of LF Commander Samir Geagea to collaborate with Damascus in October 1990, when Syrian forces invaded East Beirut and ousted the constitutional government of Lebanon headed by interim Minister Michel Aoun.²²⁰

An ardent supporter of Bashir al-Asad, Syria's new president since 2000, Kanaan's true power lies beyond his office, in his control over the political establishment in Lebanon, especially in his almost unchallenged power over the Lebanese Security service, the *Surété Generale*. The bloody initiation of Hezbollah's "Syrianization" was another "feat" accomplished by Kanaan, not least when he ordered the summary execution of a score of its members in 1987 for defying him. Only following his promotion in October 2002 was Kanaan replaced by Rustom Ghazaleh, a Sunni officer in the Syrian army.²²¹

This was a highly unusual move for the new and untried retainer of Alawi (read: Shi'a) power in Damascus and is illustrative of the many problems, but also suggestive of the potential chances, created by the Syrian succession. At the same time, it certainly points to the continuity of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, which had already become a structural component of Syrian foreign policy under Asad

219 Rathmell, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

220 Nassif, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

221 Young, "Lords Over Lebanon," *op. cit.*

the elder. For with its sinecures and other rewards, the Lebanese dependency had conferred considerable power unto Hafez al-Asad after 1976, a point he did not fail to impress upon his son, Bashir. However, in the words of Eric Thompson,

[t]he allegiance of Syria's military and the many overlapping intelligence and security agencies, is not necessarily transferable from father to son. The continued occupation of Lebanon gives Bashar a chit to play in the high stakes game of Syrian politics. The ability of Syrian soldiers – especially the officer corps – to make money via legal or illicit activities in Lebanon is a perk that keeps this critical constituency supportive of the regime. Additionally, the ability of the Syrian forces to carry on the Arab struggle against Israel on the political and military battlefields of Lebanon has allowed the Syrian regime to gain maximum political advantage with minimal strategic risk.²²²

Thus, in many ways, Syrian control over Lebanon constitutes the linchpin of the younger Asad's power structure, but it also imposes upon the new regime the retention of its predecessor's commitment to political violence movements as an integral component of its foreign policy. Realistically, and absent a decisive intervention by the U.S. and its regional allies, Syrian support for organizations involved in, and intending to commit, terrorist acts will remain a likely prospect for years to come.

3.2 Syrian PVM Clients: Who's Who?

What certainly distinguishes Syria from other state supporters of political violence movements is the diversity of its clients: Marxist, Lebanese and Palestinian Shi'ite and Sunni Islamist and nationalist forces freely mingle in Damascus, with these organizations' press offices and training facilities located in its agglomeration. If a truncated southern Lebanon has indeed become "Hizballahland" in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal, then Syria's capital has been turned into a veritable Disneyland of terrorism. Syria's new ruler, Bashir al-Asad, not unlike his father, plays host and sponsor to at least seven active political violence movements.

Although U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has dubbed Hezbollah "the 'A-team' of terrorists," the most prominent

222 Thompson, *op. cit.*, 93.

organizations among the Syrian coterie of proxy warfare groups are certainly both the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah, each in their respective territorial context.²²³ There is a deep-seated irony to Syria's staunch, almost passionate support for Hamas, for the Syrian domestic branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – Hamas' parent organization, was brutally suppressed by Asad the elder in February 1982. In the course of Asad's campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood in the town of Hama, civilians in the thousands were murdered in cold blood.²²⁴ While Hezbollah has had long-standing ties with the Syrian regime in the context of the Syrian-Iranian strategic partnership in Lebanon, Hamas is a relative newcomer. The elder Asad invited Hamas to join the "Damascus-based rejectionist coalition" only following the Oslo Accords.²²⁵ According to Gary Gambill, Syria's sponsorship since the early 1990s has affected Hamas to the effect that the organization's hawkish foreign leadership, that is, its Damascus headquarters, has been empowered at the expense of the "inside" leadership in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, that has proven more sensitive to opportunities for accommodation with the PA and with Israel.²²⁶

Syria's relationship with Hezbollah has undergone several phases. Even so, what is clear is that Syria realized the potential of Hezbollah from an early date. In the aftermath of the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Hezbollah's emergence as the Islamic resistance to Israeli occupation provided both Syria and Iran with the perfect pretext to project their own foreign policy interests to southern Lebanon, and to manifest these interests in the shape of full-fledged support for Hezbollah. "Although the escalatory Hizb'allah attacks on Israel suited the strategic designs of both Syria and Iran, a few signs of tension emerged in the Iranian-Syrian relationship," Magnus Ranstorp tells us.²²⁷ The Iranian-Syrian rivalry, which was to leave its imprint on the years between 1985 and 1992, took on the shape of an Iranian challenge to Syrian suzerainty in occupied Lebanon. On the ground, the temporary deterioration of the Iranian-Syrian relationship found ample expression in the feud between the Shi'ite Amal militia, which

223 Luft, *op. cit.*, p. 2; Byman, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

224 Cf. Friedman, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–105.

225 Gambill, "Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas," *op. cit.*, p. 4.

226 Ibid., *op. cit.*,

227 Ranstorp, "Hizb'allah in Lebanon," *op. cit.*, p. 118.

acted as Syria's proxy force, and Hezbollah, Iran's principal ally in Lebanon. In their struggle over Hezbollah, Syria and Iran had certainly come to the end of their honeymoon.

Hezbollah's "Lebanonization" process in the 1990s, that is, Hezbollah's political will to engage with the realities of a multi-confessional state and its participation in this state's political system, was largely due to Syria's brutal assertion of its military brawns in the later 1980s. With control over the supply routes of the Pasdaran in the Beqaa, which, in turn, represented the mainstay of Iranian power in Lebanon, Syria had the upper hand. As a consequence, Hezbollah had undergone "Syrianization" at the expense of Iran's influence over the Shi'ite militants.²²⁸ Currently, Hezbollah's cardinal utility to Syria rests in the fact that it has filled the power vacuum left behind in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in June 2000; and also in the sustained pressure Hezbollah exerts on Israeli defensive positions along its northern borders, especially in the area of the Sheba Farms disputed by both Lebanon and Syria. In specialist circles, the threat posed by Hezbollah "with its sophisticated armaments, territorial base [in Lebanon], state sponsorship by Syria and Iran, and financial resources" supersedes even the risks represented by al-Qaida.²²⁹

The PFLP-GC and the PIJ make an unlikely couple, and, indeed, their only common denominator, other than Syria's patronage, is that in the framework of Syria's pecking order they are held to rank below Hezbollah and Hamas in terms of their relative power.²³⁰ In terms of manpower, the PFLP's membership is estimated at anything from 500 to 1,000 militants. The PFLP-GC split first from the second largest Palestinian militant group, George Habash's PFLP, in 1968, and then became estranged from Arafat's Fatah in 1983, after the PLO chairman had proposed to negotiate with Israel. Subsequent to the PLO's expulsion from Lebanon by Israeli and Christian Maronite forces, also in 1983, the PFLP-GC "operated less as a Syrian-backed Palestinian group than as a Palestinian auxiliary of Syrian military

228 Gambill and Abdelnour, "Hezbollah Between Tehran and Damascus," *op. cit.*, p. 8.

229 "Meanwhile Back in Damascus," *Jerusalem Post*, 14 July 2003 at www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=Jpost/A/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1058153636544 accessed on 15 July 2003.

230 This also appears to be true vis-à-vis Hamas and the PLO's Fatah movement in the territories, where the PIJ has become a minority faction since 1987. Hatima, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

intelligence.”²³¹ Ahmed Jibril’s PFLP-GC for all intents and purposes constitutes an integral part of Syria’s armed forces. With practically no capacity for independent action, it is reasonable to assume that the PFLP-GC’s operations are carried out at the command of the Syrian leadership. As the proxy war against Israel in southern Lebanon after the IDF’s withdrawal has been in the hands of Hezbollah, a group that has maintained some freedom for maneuver despite Syrian attempts at achieving absolute control over it, Bashir al-Asad has been actively grooming Jibril’s organization as a backup. In the context of the al-Aqsa Intifadah, the PFLP-GC has carried out multiple arms smuggling missions at the behest of its Syrian masters and on behalf of Palestinian political violence movements in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, notably aboard the “Santorini.” Moreover, the PFLP-GC has also become a component of the well-oiled Iranian-Syrian cooperative framework, in that it has reportedly trained members of Palestinian rejectionist groups (notably the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade and the PIJ) and been rewarded for its trouble by the Islamic Republic, while the Syrians provided for the logistics of the joint-venture.²³²

Besides the Islamic governments of Iran and Sudan, Syria is the principal supporter of the PIJ. Following the expulsion of the PIJ’s leadership from the Palestinian territories in 1988, the movement’s base of operations moved to Lebanon and Syria.²³³ The former head of the PIJ, Dr Fathi Shiqaqi, allegedly assassinated by Israeli agents in 1995, resided in Damascus. Dr Ramadan Shalah, Shiqaqi’s successor, also has settled in the Syrian capital and directs the PIJ’s operations from his Damascus office. Moreover, the PIJ “shares a training base with Hizballah in the Syrian-controlled northern Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.”²³⁴ Although the PIJ follows an Islamist ideology, in the Damascus context, its ties with the PFLP-GC, an organization with decidedly nationalist-socialist credentials, are cordial, whereas its relation with its fellow rejectionist-religious political violence movement Hamas have been marred by considerable rivalry. Under the aegis of the Syrians, and under Iranian duress, the PIJ joined Hamas in a rejectionist coalition called the Alliance of Palestinian Forces

231 Gambill, “Sponsoring Terror: Syria and PFLP-GC,” p. 3.

232 Levitt, *Targeting Terror*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

233 Hatima, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–40.

234 Alexander, *op. cit.*, 34.

(APF) after the signing of the Oslo accords.²³⁵ The Iranian-Syrian division of labor with respect to the PIJ is fairly banal: Iran provides the funds and Syria the logistical support. The similarity with Hezbollah's case is striking indeed, for as with Hezbollah, Syria capitalizes upon its power of granting or denying access to Iranian resources intended for the PIJ.

A few smaller, nationalist and nationalist-socialist Palestinian splinter-groups that seceded from the PLO, such as George Habash's PFLP, Naif Hawatmeh's Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) and a renegade Fatah faction under Abu Mussa all have found refuge in Damascus, and to a greater or lesser extent are all on the Syrian government's payroll.²³⁶ In line with the logic of the Asad clan's regional alignment, Syria is also known to have a long history of supporting the PKK and its successor organization, KADEK, in their struggle against the Turkish government.

A more recent development in Syria's support for political violence movements is its sponsorship of the ruler of Ain al-Hilweh, Lieutenant-Colonel Mounir al-Muqdash. Syria has traditionally worked to undermine Arafat and his Fatah faction by supporting secessionist splinter groups: This *modus operandi* certainly applies to the al-Muqdash Fatah faction, which has become the enforcer of the Iranian-Syrian agenda among Lebanon's Palestinian militants. Al-Muqdash has proven most useful in a number of endeavors, but his greatest utility to his Syrian patrons has been in the area of recruiting militants for the Palestinian and Iraqi theaters of war.²³⁷ Crowning the diversity of clients under Syrian patronage, al-Muqdash's faction is credited with being a point of contact for Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, of having trained al-Qaida personnel in Ain al-Hil-

235 Levitt, "Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Islamic Jihad," *op. cit.*, p. 2.

236 Yonah Alexander, *Middle East Terrorism. Selected Group Profiles* (New York: Transnational Publishers, 2003), pp. 21, 91–92; Erlich, "Terrorism as a Preferred Instrument of Syrian Policy," *op. cit.*, p. 7; Ganor, "Syria and Terrorism," pp. 9–13.

237 "Syria's Pivotal Role in Iraqi Resistance Is Glossed Over in Washington," *op. cit.* Cf. Abdelnour, "Syria's Proxy Forces in Iraq," *op. cit.*, pp. 1–2. Cf. Abdelnour, "Syria's Proxy Forces in Iraq," *op. cit.*, p. 2.

weh – the Palestinian refugee camp it controls – while it is also suspected of having allowed Usbat al-Ansar, a Sunni Islamist group close to al-Qaida, to flourish under its wings.²³⁸

3.3 The Nature and Extent of Syrian Support for PVMs

Not unlike the Iranian case, the facilitation of illicit arms transfers to Shi'ite extremists in Lebanon and the Palestinian rejectionist groups active in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as shown in the case of the "Santorini" in May 2001, is not the only avenue of Syrian support for political violence movements. Syria's long history and its continued and unabated backing of organizations involved in terrorist acts largely accounts for being listed as a terrorist state sponsor by the U.S. State Department. "Syria," Robert Rabil tells us "has been on this list since its creation [in 1979], and thus has stopped receiving any type of assistance from the US."²³⁹

Weapons. The composition of the arms shipment intercepted aboard the "Santorini" may here serve as an indication for the quality and quantity of three prior attempts to land arms on the Gaza and Sinai coast, of which two were successful and one abortive due to the early appearance of a routine Israeli naval patrol.²⁴⁰ The purveyor of arms and its taskmaster on the fourth run of the "Santorini" can clearly be identified as the PFLP-GC and, hence, the Syrian regime. As mentioned earlier, the PFLP-GC does not act autonomously, or without license from Damascus. Apparently, the PFLP-GC had been responsible for the first and last voyage of the smuggling yacht, while Hezbollah at the behest of Syria's potentates, took care of the second and third attempts.²⁴¹ Concerning the Syrian armament of political violence movements in Lebanon, Gal Luft suggests that in exchange for services rendered by Hezbollah, such as weapons smuggling,

238 Gambill, "Dossier: Mounir al-Maqdah," *op. cit.*, p. 3; Gary Gambill and Bassam Endrawos, "Bin Laden's Network in Lebanon," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 3, No. 9. (September 2001), p. 5 at www.meib.org/articles/0109_11.htm accessed on 11 June 2003. Cf. Yoni Fighel and Yael Shahar, "The Al-Qaida-Hizballah Connection," International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 26 February 2002 at www.ict.org.il/articles/articleDet.cfm?articleid=425 accessed on 25 March 2003.

239 Robert Rabil, "The Ineffective Role of the US in the US-Israeli-Syrian Relationship," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. No. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 415–438, p. 416.

240 "Ahmed Jibril Vows Further Arms Shipments to Palestinians," *op. cit.*

241 Ginsburg, *op. cit.*

drug trafficking and money laundering, the group receives “weapons directly from the Syrian arsenal.”²⁴²

Training and Logistics. According to an assessment made by Reuven Erlich, “[h]eadquarters, training camps, installations, and logistic, political and propaganda offices of most of these terrorist organizations [i.e. PIJ, PFLP-GC, Hamas, etc.] are located in Syria.”²⁴³ In a testimony given before the House Committee on International Relations of the U.S. House of Representatives, Damascus has been portrayed as the logistics center of several political violence movements from whence “the groups and leaders incite, recruit, train, coordinate, and direct terrorism.”²⁴⁴ In the time since the attacks of 11 September 2001, five political violence movements have planned and executed operations from their base in Damascus.²⁴⁵ In addition to its base in Damascus, the PFLP-GC alone allegedly maintains no less than fifteen different facilities in Syrian-occupied Lebanon. Furthermore, Syria has also shown considerable talent in the spotting and coordinating of synergies among its clients, as evidenced by the use of the PFLP-GC to train members of several Palestinian rejectionist groups in PFLP-GC facilities in the Damascus environs.²⁴⁶ Syria therefore stands accused of having provided a significant number of organizations involved in terrorist acts with a base of operations and logistical resources. Conversely, the extent of the Syrian clients’ dependence on their patron is aptly illustrated by Syria’s ability to deny resources, for example,

whenever Hizb’allah has seriously challenged Syrian authority, the Syrian regime has moved to exercise control over the activity of the Hizb’allah through a blockade of the transfer of Iranian Pasdaran in the Biq’a [Beqaa] area and the control of movement of the Hizb’allah in the Biq’a and Beirut areas.²⁴⁷

242 Luft, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

243 Erlich, “Terrorism as a Preferred Instrument of Syrian Policy,” *op. cit.*, p. 7.

244 Levitt, “Syrian Sponsorship of Global Terrorism: The Need for Accountability,” *op. cit.*, p. 2.

245 Ibid., *op. cit.*, pp. 2–3.

246 Matthew Levitt, “Terror From Damascus, Part 1: The Palestinian Terrorist Presence in Syria,” *Peacewatch*, No. 420, 7 May 2003 at www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/Peacewatch/peacewatch2003/420.htm accessed on 6 June 2003.

247 Ranstorp, *Hizb’allah in Lebanon*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

Despite angry denials from Damascus, and in spite of the application of considerable pressure by the U.S. throughout 2003, the Syrians continue to groom Palestinian extremist groups as a ready tool in the service of their foreign political designs against regional rivals.²⁴⁸

Recruiting and Funding. Syria's involvement in the recruiting of militants is as opaque, as it is deniable. Because of the protracted Syrian occupation in Lebanon with its pronounced anti-Western tenor, this multi-confessional state comprised of minority religious groups provides Syria's clients with an optimum reservoir of resentment against U.S. and Israeli interests in the Middle East. A good example of Syria's policy of circuitous involvement in the recruitment drive of its proxies is the activities of the master of Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon, and erstwhile Fatah officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Mounir al-Muqdash. "Israeli security forces discovered that some Hamas and Islamic Jihad suicide bombers were being recruited from Muqdash's militia."²⁴⁹ Muqdash appears to be behind the embodiment of two new Palestinian rejectionist groups affiliated with, but not necessarily subject to, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades: the Return Brigades and al-Nathir (the Harbinger). According to the Palestinian newspaper "Assennara," Muqdash claimed that he was responsible for the recruitment of hundreds of Palestinians in Ain al-Hilweh, and for sending them into Iraq to join the struggle against the Western Coalition forces deployed there. Syria is actively assisting the endeavor. Reportedly, Damascus has become the nexus of anti-Western "resistance-tourism" in the Arab world, currently directed against the U.S.-led Coalition forces in Iraq. But domestic potential is tapped, too, by the Alawite regime, for "at least 1,000 Palestinians from the Yarmouk refugee camp outside of Damascus volunteered to fight in Iraq."²⁵⁰

As opposed to Iran and Saudi Arabia, Syria is not known for its financial largesse vis-à-vis its proxies in terms of straightforward cash donations. Syrian financial assistance usually comes with multiple strings attached. Either this is the case, because the political violence

248 Dexter Filkins, "Hamas Going Strong in Syria, Some Say," *International Herald Tribune*, 14 July 2003, p. 3; "Syria and Iran Deny That They Harbor Terrorists," *International Herald Tribune*, 23 July 2003, p. 5; Brian Knowlton, "Syria Still Helping Terrorists, U.S. Official Says," *International Herald Tribune*, 17 September 2003, p. 3.

249 Gambill, "Dossier: Mounir al-Maqdash," *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

250 Abdelnour, "Syria's Proxy Forces in Iraq," *op. cit.*, p. 2.

movement in question is virtually integrated into the Syrian army establishment (e.g. al Saiqa, the PFLP-GC “mechanized brigade” and certain cells of Hezbollah in Lebanon that are also supplied out of the Syrian armory), or because the material support provided by Syrian sources comes in the shape of arms, facilities, or logistics. As suggested by Gal Luft, in the context of the Iranian-Syrian strategic partnership’s division of labor, the supply of finances is not really the preserve of Syria. In practice, this is evidenced by Hezbollah, which receives most of its funding from Iran.²⁵¹ In the case of Hamas, for example, “the Assad regime’s most significant contribution,” is “the virtually unrestricted access it [Hamas] was granted to Syrian-occupied Lebanon.”²⁵² In that sense, it is probably more appropriate to stress the role of Saudi Arabia in having supported “two particular policies that have a direct bearing on terrorism: the occupation of Lebanon and the hosting of terror groups in Damascus.”²⁵³

3.4 The Long-Term Strategic Objectives of Syrian Support for PVMs

The likely perpetuation of Alawite preponderance in the Syrian political structure, either in the current shape of the Asad-clan’s succession, or by the entrenchment of an Alawite oligarchy around a weakened presidential office, suggests a future retention of proxy warfare as a ready tool of Syrian foreign policy. And as Bashir al-Asad’s hold on power heavily depends on Syria’s continued occupation of Lebanon as a reservoir of perks for the Syrian armed forces, and an augmentation of the all but exhausted Syrian economy, the critical question is that of whether the Syrian occupation of Lebanon can be maintained in the face of mounting pressure in the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal in June 2000. Absent a dramatic development in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations track, the response to this question may well be “yes.”²⁵⁴ The further consolidation of Syrian power in, and the retention of, Lebanon as a “qutr,” or province of an Arab land that, at least as seen from Damascus’ perspective, is ideally congruent with the

251 Luft, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

252 Gambill, “Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas,” *op. cit.*, p. 5.

253 Sohail, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

254 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

conception of a Greater Syria, therefore constitute twin priorities on Syria's foreign political agenda.²⁵⁵

Syria's unabated investment in, and maintenance and control of, the terror infrastructure in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps, and the Shi'ite strongholds in the Beqaa, West Beirut and southern Lebanon further suggests that Bashir al-Asad considers the support for political violence movements a critical means to maintain Syria's grip on Lebanon. The deployment of Lebanon's terror infrastructure serves Bashir al-Asad both to stabilize his rule in Damascus, and as a base of operation and as a staging area from which his proxies can continue to conduct Syria's underhand low-intensity conflict campaign against Israel and other antagonistic actors in the region. This dual utility of Lebanon to Syria's ruling elite also contains a reciprocal element, in that the use of political violence movements allow Bashir al-Asad to maintain the pressure on Israel concerning the annexation of the Golan Heights, which in turn confers credibility on Asad's regime in the eyes of his supporters. "Peace with Israel will undoubtedly put Syrian interests in Lebanon at risk and thus may very well disrupt the stability of the Ba'athi regime. In the event of a peace treaty, Syria will have no reason to keep its military in Lebanon."²⁵⁶

Peace with Israel could well prove catastrophic for Syria's president, and for the governing Alawite elite, too. Indeed, Syria's continued support for political violence movements active in, and operating out of, Lebanon will almost certainly preclude an Israeli-Syrian settlement. Hence, Syria cannot in good sense afford to discard its terror weapon for the sake of territorial gains in the Golan and peace with Israel. Additionally, Bashir al-Asad's options for a settlement have been fundamentally restricted by his father's historic pledge to link any settlement with Israel to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli treaty. Following the "defection" of Egypt and Jordan, both of which have signed peace treaties with Israel in 1977/1978 and 1994 respectively, the Syrian position has become more pragmatic by defining the unconditional return of the Golan Heights as the *sine qua non* of any kind of bilateral agreement with the Jewish state. Any deviation from this position would compromise Syria's credibility in the

255 Rabil, *Embattled Neighbours*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

256 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Arab world.²⁵⁷ If the survival of Asad's regime is tied to the lack of a bilateral Israeli-Syrian, or even that of a comprehensive regional settlement, then the critically important role of political violence movements in the maintenance of the status quo of low-intensity conflict and cross-border tit-for-tat attacks will ensure the continuance of Syria's support for Hezbollah, the PIJ, Hamas, the PFLP-GC and all its other proxies.

The Israeli perception of Syria's position on support for its clients – especially Hezbollah – by and large substantiates this picture. In an article entitled “The Calculus of Violence in Lebanon,” Professor Efraim Inbar, one of Israel's foremost pundits on matters strategic not so long ago concurred with the IDF's assessment

that Hizbullah will not be satisfied with Israel returning to the international border [with Lebanon], but will continue to harass Israeli targets south of it. Hizbullah is not entirely independent; and it is Syria, which controls Lebanon, that allows this radical Islamic organization to bleed Israel for its own reasons.²⁵⁸

In the interim, Inbar's assessment has proven accurate in that the eruption of Hezbollah's violence, and by extension, that of Palestinian rejectionist groups on the Syrian payroll, has been closely tied to the progress, or rather lack of it, in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations track. The Syrian position on its unabashed support for anti-Israeli groups further corroborates this impression. Syria's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Buthaina Shabaan, was quoted as saying “[i]t is not possible for Syria to consider the Palestinian struggle for freedom, independence and ending Israeli occupation' of Arab territories as terrorism...”²⁵⁹

Syria's long-term strategic objectives in its support for political violence movements may also be gleaned from the Turkish example. With respect to Turkey, Syria's regime is essentially facing an extension of its fundamental problem in the Israeli context – that it is militarily hamstrung by the declining condition in which it finds its forces more than a decade after Syria's principal supplier of military hardware, the Soviet Union, has collapsed. Despite an abundance of

257 Henry Siegman, “Being Hafez al-Assad. Syria's Chilly But Consistent Peace Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (May/June), pp. 2–7, pp. 2–5.

258 Inbar, “The Calculus of Violence in Lebanon,” *op. cit.*, p. 1.

259 “Syria and Iran Deny That They Harbor Terrorists,” *op. cit.*

grating disputes with Turkey, Syria is not in a position to present a determined stance on these contentious issues by exerting credible military pressure against Ankara. Recourse to the terror weapon has ultimately not paid off either, as the Turko-Syrian showdown over Syria's support for PKK in 1998 demonstrated. Turkey is known for its tough stance on Syria's support for political violence movements and has even accused Israel of "appeasement."²⁶⁰ This does not signify, however, that Syria will not continue to use proxies in its multiple disputes, involving water resources and historical territorial claims, with its regional rivals.

For on the regional level, Syria, not unlike Iran, finds itself threatened by the prospect of a federated Israeli-Turkish bloc. In the long vista of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Turko-Israeli defense relationship is of relatively recent origin, and its long-term effects on Syria's support for its Lebanese and Palestinian clients is therefore difficult to gauge. What can be said at this point is that the Middle East has witnessed a loose drawing together of coalitions, which, in turn suggests, that bilateral tensions may well be translated to a supranational level in the near future:

...the [Turko-Israeli] alliance is an encirclement of Syria and a challenge to Damascus which Syria is quick to realize... In response to the Turkish-Israeli axis, there seems to be a rapprochement between Syria and Iran. Although the Iranian government denies that a Syrian-Iranian axis is forming in response to the Turkish-Israeli military pacts, it may very well have been triggered by the Turkish-Israeli axis.²⁶¹

The increasing polarization of these two blocks, exacerbated by the ties each one entertains with extra-regional allies, whose relationships are also marked by deep-seated antagonisms (i.e. India and Pakistan), contribute to the stabilization of instability in the region.²⁶²

In such a climate, the continued use, if not augmentation, of the Syrian terror-weapon in the service of cementing Bashir al-Asad's power at home by keeping Lebanon in the Syrian fold, while still

260 Robert Fisk, "Jerusalem Draws in the Turks to Spy on Arab Foes," originally published in the *Independent*, c. January/February 1999 at www.middleeast.org/archives/1999_02_24.htm accessed on 23 June 2003.

261 Bac, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

262 Ilan Berman, "Israel, India, and Turkey: Triple Entente?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 2002), p. 3. at www.meforum.org/pf.php?id=504 accessed on 23 June 2003.

striking at Israel through its Lebanese and Palestinian proxies, and possibly supporting Kurdish insurgents in Anatolia and Iraq, is a foregone conclusion. As long as Syria is not compelled to forgo the terror-weapon, for example, by the credible threat of an imminent invasion by the Coalition forces in the Middle East (and in accordance with the Turkish precedent of 1998), its leadership will not desist from continuing its support for political violence movements. In this vein, an editorial in the *Jerusalem Post* recently argued “if past performance is any indicator of future behaviour, Syrian President Bashir al-Assad has shown that he can be counted on not to believe the US is serious and not adhere to Washington’s demands.”²⁶³ For against the backdrop of the Middle Eastern military balance’s stark realities, and in accordance with the chilling logic of the Syrian praetorian state, the calibrated use of the terror-weapon as a component of its carrot-and-stick diplomacy constitutes Syria’s only promising means of, in the best case, realizing its regional political designs by increments. This creeping policy may then conceivably lead to a victory by sheer attrition, or, alternatively and more likely, by maintaining the post-1976 status quo that holds the promise of future change to Syria’s advantage in the context of bilateral treaties: the maintenance of Lebanon as a Syrian colony, and Israeli and Turkish concessions on territorial and resource issues, all of which will ensconce Bashir in Syria’s leadership position.

3.5 U.S. Policy on Syria’s Support for PVMs

The stage of the U.S.’ current policy on Syria was set in 1979, when Syria became what Matthew Levitt has ironically referred to as a “charter member of the State Department’s state sponsors of terrorism list.”²⁶⁴ Even before that date, Syria fell under the “International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act” (1976); and was also included in the “Export Administration Act” (1979). These two legal instruments enacted the termination of foreign aid to state supporters of political violence movements deemed “terrorist,” and restricted technology transfer to such entities by subjecting the permission to export to Congressional scrutiny.²⁶⁵ However, when jux-

263 “Meanwhile, Back in Damascus,” *op. cit.*

264 Levitt, *Targeting Terror*, p. 48.

265 Rabil, *Embattled Neighbours*, *op. cit.*, pp. 85–86.

taped with the exercise of Washington's conduct vis-à-vis Damascus, the U.S. State Department's continued classification of Syria as a "state sponsor of terrorism" begs the question of why successive U.S. administrations since the late 1970s have not taken a tougher line toward first Hafez al-Asad's regime, and more recently, toward Bashar al-Asad's new government. While U.S. policy on Iran's support for political violence movements is relatively clear-cut, the case of America's approach toward Syria on the diplomatic stage is more ambivalent.

The principal reason for U.S. equivocality must be sought in the divergent positions on Syria's conduct by U.S. state institutions. "Upon analysis it becomes clear that while American administrations have been closer to the Syrian position regarding resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict (thereby found tacitly biased toward Syria), Congress has always greatly supported Israel."²⁶⁶ Despite having been the victim of terrorist attacks in 1983 and thereafter in the Levant, the lack of a clear U.S. policy on Syria is even more pronounced with respect to Lebanon and the illegal Syrian occupation thereof after 1976. An acerbic critic of both Syria's regime and U.S. policy on Syria, Daniel Pipes in the later 1980s argued that the U.S. had allowed itself to be duped by the Syrians in the context of the serial abductions taking place in Lebanon after 1983:

First, the Syrian government engages in some outrageous act, usually involving terrorism, against Americans. Second, the United States government indicates strong displeasure, or even takes action against Damascus. Third – and this is the key – [Hafez al-] Asad arranges the release of captive Americans, or makes publicized gestures to this end. Fourth, American public opinion is diverted and Washington scraps plans to retaliate against Syria.²⁶⁷

Gary Gambill has gone beyond Pipes' critique of U.S. foreign policy on Syria, suggesting that "while US officials have long paid lip service to the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty, two successive administrations have found it politically expedient for one reason or another

266 Rabil, "The Ineffective Role of the US in the US-Israeli-Syrian Relationship," *op. cit.*, p. 415.

267 Daniel Pipes, "Assad's Cunning Game," *Washington Post*, 4 November 1986 at www.danielpipes.org/pf.php?id=172 accessed on 26 August 2003.

to tacitly support Syrian authority over the country.”²⁶⁸ And, indeed, when the interim president of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, installed by the last elected head of state, launched an offensive to defend the country’s sovereignty against an aggressive Syrian attempt to assert absolute control, the first (G.H.W.) Bush administration undermined the final concerted Lebanese effort to escape Syrian hegemony. After all, Syria had agreed, albeit for its own reasons, to join the U.S.-led Coalition against Iraq during the Second Gulf War (1990–1991), and therefore managed to bask in the good graces of the first Bush administration. The Republicans’ flirt with the Coalition’s Arab allies during the Second Gulf War at the cost of compelling Israeli inactivity during that conflict had disgruntled pro-Israeli lobbies in Washington. As a consequence, they pledged their allegiance to the Democratic candidate, William Clinton.²⁶⁹

Bent on bringing about a comprehensive settlement for the Middle East, the Clinton administration focused on the Israeli-Syrian track, especially on the principal bone of contention – the return of the Golan Heights to Syria – and conveniently abandoned its pre-election championing of a free Lebanon. With the U.S. emphasis on the Israeli-Syrian track, there was no need to compel a withdrawal of Syrian troops that occupied Lebanon in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 520 since 17 September 1982, and effectively since the Syrian invasion of 1976; nor could the political will be found in order to secure the reinstatement of Lebanese sovereignty by diplomatic means.²⁷⁰ In contrast to Saddam Hussein’s regime in the historical context of the Gulf region during the Cold War, and in its role as a layer in the containment of Iran before the Third Gulf War was fought in early 2003, the Asad dynasty has never offered the U.S. any palpable benefits or utility that would justify U.S. reticence toward Syria’s sustained involvement in terrorist acts. Arguably, the U.S. position on Syria before 2000 makes very little sense: It failed in its repeated attempts to prod Syria into abandoning its support for political violence movements, while Syria’s occupation never did – at

268 Gary C. Gambill, “US Mideast Policy and the Syrian Occupation of Lebanon,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (March 2001), p. 1 at www.meib.org/articles/0103_11.htm accessed on 9 July 2003.

269 Rabil, “The Ineffective Role of the US in the US-Israeli-Syrian Relationship,” *op. cit.*, p. 426.

270 Gambill, “US Mideast Policy and the Syrian Occupation of Lebanon,” *op. cit.*, pp. 2–4.

least not officially – coincide with the U.S. vision for a peace in the Middle East. As a matter of fact, quite the opposite has been the case since 1979.

The in the interim almost characteristic schizophrenia of U.S. policy on Syria only became marginally more consistent after the accession to power of the second Bush administration in 2000, and the gradual emergence of its forward strategy with respect to the Middle East and the Gulf region. Nevertheless, the habitual tension between U.S. state institutions has remained, although it has been toned down considerably. The current U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, despite all his rhetoric to the contrary, appears to tread in the footsteps of his predecessor, James Baker, in that he prefers a diplomatic solution to a more forceful approach to the Syrian issue.²⁷¹ Powell's outlook on the Middle East, however, does not represent the majority consensus in the second Bush administration, which is strongly influenced by the neo-conservative agenda that is as intrinsically inimical to a continuation of the Alawite regime, as it is hostile to Iran's theocratic oligarchy. Moreover, the new administration does not accord the Israeli-Syrian track the priority status it was given by its predecessor: The current emphasis is on the remodelling of the Middle East in the face of the Islamist threat, in line with the "Axis of Evil" paradigm, and in the larger context of the "War on Terror." Accordingly, Bashir al-Asad has felt the full scrutiny of the U.S. government of late, and even more intensely since the eve of the Third Gulf War that has transported the forces of the Coalition to his very doorstep.

The position of the incumbent U.S. Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Ambassador Cofer Black, is illustrative of immediate U.S. concerns, as they relate to Syria, and suggests a more pronounced criticism of Syria from the U.S. vantage on the terrorism issue:

The terrorist threat posed by Syria can best be understood by addressing three areas: border security, which is directly related to the security of our forces in Iraq: Syrian government support for Palestinian rejection-

271 U.S. Department of State/Secretary Colin L. Powell, "Interview on ABC's This Week With George Stephanopoulos," 4 May 2003 at www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/20164.htm accessed on 3 September 2003. For Powell's position cf. Zvi Bar'el, "Decyphering the Syrians," *Ha'aretz*, 7 September 2003 at www.haaretzdaily.com/hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=316000 accessed on 7 September 2003.

ist groups; and Syrian support for Lebanese Hizbollah... We... remain concerned about the possibility of anti-coalition activity being organized inside Syrian territory... Syrian tolerance of Palestinian rejectionist groups' offices in their country shows a lack of commitment to support reasonable efforts toward a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians... Syrian support for Hizbollah continues to be a major impediment towards progress in our counterterrorism efforts.²⁷²

Ambassador Black's view is more in line with the U.S. Department of Defense's own position on Syria, and may well enjoy tacit approval by the President and some of his closest advisers, such as his National Security Advisor, Condoleeza Rice. Nevertheless, there still remains a pointed lack of congruity concerning the U.S. policy on Syria in the administration. Consistent with an almost traditional distribution of interests of the past two decades, "[t]he US government's tacit support for Syria's occupation of Lebanon is not endorsed outside the executive branch..."²⁷³

With a climate turned progressively less favorable for Syria during the tenure of the second Bush administration, and more immediately, during the Third Gulf War that found Syria opposing and sharply condemning U.S. action in Iraq, a fundamental change in U.S. policy toward Syria could have been expected to occur earlier in the year. In effect, the tide only did turn in October 2003. By July 2003, President Bush warned Syria in tandem with Iran that they would "be held accountable," should they fail to work with Washington in its "War on Terror."²⁷⁴ On 3 October, a PIJ suicide bomber detonated his weapon in the Israeli port city of Haifa, killing 20. On 4 October, the Israeli Air Force attacked Ain Saheb camp in the vicinity of Damascus – a facility used by the PFLP-GC earlier in 2003. At the time of the attack this training camp was undergoing refurbishment for future use, allegedly by the PIJ. In the aftermath of the Ain Saheb air raid, and in spite of European pressure to censure Israel, President George W. Bush clearly stated that Israel should not "feel

272 US Senate Foreign Relations Committee/Ambassador Cofer Black, "Syria and Terrorism," 30 October 2003 at www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2003/25778.htm accessed on 17 November 2003.

273 Gambill, "US Mideast Policy and the Syrian Occupation of Lebanon," *op. cit.*, p. 6.

274 Allen, *op. cit.*

constrained.”²⁷⁵ While not a clear-cut endorsement of the Israeli air-raid, America’s position with respect to Israel’s retaliatory course of action had shifted, and thereby also suggested a change in its position towards Syria. Even so, “most public statements by US officials indicated that Syrian non-compliance would merely preclude an *improvement* in US-Syrian relations.”²⁷⁶ But as wave after wave of Palestinian suicide bombers terrorized Israel, the final obstacles to passage of the “Syria Accountability and Lebanese Restoration Act” (SALSA) – especially the executive branch’s habitual opposition to legislation restrictive of its policy options – crumbled in the face of massive Congressional pressure on the U.S. administration. On 15 October 2003, the House of Representatives voted 398–4 for the “Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act” of 2003, which calls for a halt to Syrian support for terrorism, an end to its occupation of Lebanon, a halt to its development of weapons of mass destruction and a cessation of its illegal importation of Iraqi oil. On 11 November 2003, the Senate voted 89–4 for SALSA.²⁷⁷ U.S. legislators have signed SALSA into law. It remains to be seen, whether the passage of SALSA will be able to reinforce the trend begun under the second Bush administration to reconcile the differing interests of U.S. state institutions, and to streamline its policy toward a determined, zero-tolerance U.S. policy with respect to Syria’s sustained, partially underhand support for political violence movements involved in terrorist acts. What is certain is that Lebanon’s government has lived up to its image as Syrian satellite and dutifully protested SALSA’s passage through Congress.²⁷⁸

275 Gary C. Gambill, “Implications of the Israeli Reprisal in Syria,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 10 (October 2003) at www.meib.org/articles/0310_s2.htm accessed on 29 October 2003.

276 Abdelnour, “The US-Syrian Crisis: Why Diplomacy Failed,” *op. cit.*

277 For the contents of the act as discussed since the summer of 2002, and arguments for its enactment, see “US Policy Toward Syria and the Syria Accountability Act,” Hearing Before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia of the Committee on International Relations House of Representatives (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002)

278 Elie Hourani, “Politicians Deplore US Pressure on Syria,” *The Daily Star*, 15 December 2003 at www.dailystar.com.lb/15_12_03_/art1.asp accessed on 15 December 2003.

3.6 Israeli Policy on Syria's Support for PVMs

In the context of the Iranian-Syrian axis as the principal regional threat to Israel, Syria's geographic proximity to Israel renders the Alawite regime in Damascus the more immediate and dangerous contender in the region. In spite of Syria's military inferiority, this is certainly true on the level of conventional warfare. One rung higher – on the level of unconventional strategic threats – Israel does not fear the possibility of Syrian escalation as much, as it does apprehend the future deployment of nuclear weapons by Iran, presaged by the development of the “Shihab-3” ballistic missile with its ominous range that allows Iran to strike at Israel, but not at targets located further away.

One rung lower – on the level of low-intensity warfare –, the picture looks very different, and there Israel has, indeed, faced one of the worst scourges to plague it since its inception. Time and again Israel defeated the full force of conventional Arab military might on the field of battle, only to be stung by Palestinian infiltrators, the “Fedayeen,” starting in the late 1960's, to be bogged down after 1982 by Lebanese militiamen and, more recently, to find that its security forces cannot be expected to outwit the ultimate smart bomb, the suicide attacker, at every turn.²⁷⁹ “Unlike the Palestinians, Syria continues to pose a strategic/military threat to Israel and to be engaged indirectly in the bloody war of attrition against Israel in southern Lebanon, through the Hizballah and in association with Iran.”²⁸⁰ And although Israel has withdrawn its army from south Lebanon since these words were penned, the Israeli-Syrian territorial dispute and, by extension, Syrian control over Lebanon in conjunction with the instrumentalization of Palestinian rejectionism, constitute key determinants in the shaping of Israeli policy on Syrian support for political violence movements.

Against the backdrop of more than twenty years of rigid obedience to the unofficial “Red Lines” agreement between Israel and Syria that demarcates spheres of influence in Lebanon, the recent development of Israel's foreign policy with respect to Syria has gone

279 Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 120–121. Cf. Paran, *op. cit.*

280 Moshe Ma'oz, “From Conflict to Peace? Israel's Relations with Syria and the Palestinians,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 393–416, p. 411.

from conciliation and concession under Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak to confrontation after the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifadah. Following a succession of abortive attempts at achieving bilateral and multilateral peace agreements with Syria in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict after 1974, the Israeli government in essaying to break this deadlock in early 2000 initiated a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon. Banking on successfully jumpstarting the flagging bilateral negotiations, and despite Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's understanding that such a step could not realistically be made conditional upon the much hoped for negotiations with Syria, a marginal majority of Israel's political establishment at the time regarded the decision for unilateral withdrawal as a viable course of action.²⁸¹ Adding a layer of complexity to the Israeli-Syrian track is the element of outside mediation provided for by Israel's ally, the U.S. Israel's attempts at making headway vis-à-vis Syria have thus not only been stalled in the confines of the bilateral Israeli-Syrian track, for even before Israel's dramatic decision to pull out of Lebanon was on the domestic political radar, Israel has had to contend with a difficult multilateral environment. This is especially true concerning the matter of Syria's involvement in terrorist acts. The Clinton administration, for example, "put much emphasis on Syria's key role in regional stability to the point of downplaying the issue of terrorism in the interest of the peace process."²⁸²

The advent of the second Bush administration; the burgeoning of the neo-conservative agenda in Washington's corridors of power and its implications for the Middle East; the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent climate of polarization in the West; the emergence of "Hizballahland" in southern Lebanon as an undesired result of the Israeli withdrawal in 2000; and the election of a conservative Israeli government, as well as the near simultaneous outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifadah have all in some measure contributed toward a hardening of the Israeli attitude in general. Specifically, however, Israel's growing irritation with its neighbour is directed against Syria's intransigence regarding the deadlocked bilateral negotiations, and, in

281 Dalia Dassa Kaye, "The Israeli Decision to Withdraw from Southern Lebanon: Political Leadership and Security Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 117, No. 4 (March 2002), pp. 561–585, p. 582.

282 Rabil, "The Ineffective Role of the US in the US-Israeli-Syrian Relationship," *op. cit.*, p. 427.

that context, is exacerbated by Syria's use of the terror-weapon as a goad to be used against Israel with apparent impunity.

The sum of these developments indicates that the figurative noose around Syria's neck is being drawn tight and is interpreted as a broad endorsement of Israel's increasingly bellicose posturing toward Syria's support of Hezbollah and Palestinian rejectionist groups: "Bush administration hawks... believe economic sanctions won't work in this [i.e. the Syrian] case; it would be better, they say, to begin talking frankly with Syria, or even threaten war."²⁸³ Viewed through the prism of recent regional political developments, Israel, in a sudden, positive reversal of fortunes, finds itself in the position, where it may become the indispensable, if controversial, asset of the U.S.' manifest determination to wage the "War on Terror" against Syria. U.S. military assets in the Middle East are spread thin, which may render the option of excluding Israeli participation in a campaign against Syria a moot point. For the first time in decades, Syria may be susceptible to the credible threat of forcible regime change by an U.S.-Israeli invasion: Syria's erstwhile rival and latter-day ally, Saddam Hussein, has been overthrown; analogous to a game of chess in which the opening gambit has been made, U.S. troops now guard the reaches of the Iraqi-Syrian border, only a heartbeat away, and with the military capability to undo the Alawite regime at a moment's notice.

In April 2003, Israel's defense minister, Shaul Mofaz, endorsed a list of demands made of Syria and submitted by his government to U.S. mediators, which placed considerable pressure on Syria to end its strategy of proxy warfare against Israel. The publication of the Israeli demands followed repeated threats against Syria by the U.S. not to shelter loyalists of the deposed Iraqi dictator.²⁸⁴ Mofaz' list and the newfound sense of direction in Israeli security agencies it betrayed, also dovetailed with an editorial published in the Jerusalem Post in July, which, indeed, suggested that should the U.S. intervene with "military operations somewhere between Syria and Lebanon, Israel must be a partner in such an effort. For Israel, being kept at arm's length during such an US actions would send a message of weakness and impotence to its neighbours that would only sow the seeds of

283 Bar'el, *op. cit.*

284 "Israel Adds to US Pressure on Syria," *Security Watch*, 15 April 2003. Email news service available at www.isn.ethz.ch.

future aggression.”²⁸⁵ In spite of a temporary respite for Syria due to a victory for the “diplomacy-based approach” favoured by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell between late summer and early fall of 2003, the current administration does not appear to fall in line with the State Department’s plotted course – a fact not lost on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.²⁸⁶ In response to a suicide terrorist attack on Haifa in early October 2003, the perpetrators of which had received Syrian support, Israel went on the offensive, raiding deep into Syrian air space: The attack on a Syrian training facility for Palestinian rejectionist militants “inaugurated a new reprisal doctrine... Every location where Palestinian terrorists train is a legitimate target... no one has immunity”²⁸⁷ Current Israeli attitudes may well point to an advanced state of resignation and frustration to bring about more than an armistice and an informal “Red Lines” agreement with Syria. Considering Israel’s desire for a stable security architecture based on peace with its neighbours, this is not entirely surprising. For the status quo with Syria has not much to show for itself, if measured against just under thirty years of dolorous engagement with an enemy, who has long ago determined that peace bears too many risks; and that its advantage thus lies in retaining the status quo and, hence, the part of antagonist.

285 “Meanwhile Back in Damascus,” *op. cit.*

286 Knowlton, *op. cit.*

287 Gambill, “Implications of the Israeli Reprisal in Syria,” *op. cit.*

