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Assad's Legions: The Syrian Intelligence Services

INTRODUCTION

Literature concerning regionally significant intelligence services is not plentiful. In an authoritarian state, such services play a central role with wide-ranging political consequences, particularly if the state is a key player in regional politics. Explaining the influence of such states on regional issues depends on understanding how intelligence services help shape internal politics.

The dearth of literature concerning the intelligence services of Middle Eastern countries is especially glaring. This analysis focusing on the structural characteristics and interactions among the several Syrian intelligence services constitutes a case study of the role of intelligence services in an authoritarian state, particularly in the Middle Eastern political milieu.

Services such as Syria's have generally been neglected in the open literature. In such regions as the Middle East, the consequences of this neglect are noteworthy. Because Syria is a key player in the politics of the Middle East, the permutations of its intelligence services have significant consequences for all of the region's peoples. Syria's pivotal role in regional politics cannot be ignored; its intelligence services are the keystone of the Syrian "political arch."

STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SYRIAN ORGANS

The Syrian state under Hafez al-Assad boasts several different intelligence organs. Assad plays a trifold game with his services: (1) their traditional role in furthering

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the interests of the state;* (2) maintaining internal security in a manner familiar to tyrants everywhere; and (3) balancing the several organs off against one another so as to maintain his personal power.

The primary modernizing influences in Syria were and are European. The twin poles of this influence are France and the Soviet Union. The French, particularly during the Mandate period, provided the intellectual framework of Syrian modernization. Since independence, particularly after the 1963 coup, the Soviet Union has been the major external supporter of Syrian policy and its major military supplier. Yet the USSR's influence on the Syrian security organs is mixed. Extensive training and education in security matters by the Soviets is evident. Implementation is, however, uniquely Syrian. Any power that provides security and intelligence training and education to another power can be expected to maintain (or try to maintain) both coercive and non-coercive links with the sister service. The Soviets can reasonably be assumed as having sought such lines with the Syrians. But Assad, not being a fool, can be expected to attempt to neutralize such Soviet efforts. The result is continuing Syrian succor from the Soviets and limited Soviet penetration of the Syrian services.

THE MILITARY COMPONENT

The military component of the Syrian services consists of several elements with varying responsibilities. The first, Air Force Intelligence, began with somewhat traditional responsibilities concerning Syria's air force and its national civilian airline. With the ascension to the directorship of General Khouli in the mid-1970s this began to change. Al-Khouli, a Sunni, is also a top advisor to Assad, a rare combination in the Syrian political dynamic. With an office near Assad's in the presidential palace, he is in charge of security at the presidential residences in Damascus and Inlatakia.¹ Air Force Intelligence now has widely variant responsibilities, including the gathering of internal political intelligence, liaison with Iran and Libya, and maintaining relations with a variety of Syrian-controlled or -influenced Palestinian groups.² Al-Khouli's second-in-command, Lt. Col. Hailam Saeed, has furthered this trend through his personal involvement in terrorist operations.³ Air Force Intelligence has, however, remained relatively small in terms of personnel, forming an elite cadre within the Syrian intelligence establishment.

A second element is the General Military Intelligence. Initially under the command of the Syrian army, in its maturity it has apparently achieved a somewhat independent status. In addition to foreign operations, it has civilian sector

* Although Assad takes this further than most, Hafez al-Assad has made state sponsored terrorism a cheap and effective tool of Syrian diplomacy.

responsibilities.⁴ The service, headed by General Ali Dubi, with headquarters in the Defense Ministry complex in Damascus, has done a thriving business in forging passports for use by terrorists, among others.⁵ Military intelligence is the largest of the intelligence organs in terms of personnel. It maintains a Palestinian branch under the command of Lt. Col. Mazhar Faris.⁶ A subdivision of this branch, known as the Commando Police, is headed by Abd al-Rahman Arafah.⁷ Until his own ill-advised bid for power, Assad's brother, Rifat (who had always done well in smuggling and real estate), headed up the paramilitary Defense Detachments, which existed to liquidate enemies of the regime.⁸ The Defense Detachments (also known as "Defense Companies," "Defense Battalions," etc.) were established in the early 1970s. Estimates of their strength have varied widely with numbers ranging from 15,000 to 25,000. Since Rifat's fall from grace they have been reduced considerably in both size and influence. Organizations such as the Defense Detachments must be properly understood. Their personnel constitute specialist troops having state security operations as their primary objective. While grouped under the intelligence rubric, their 15,000 to 25,000 members are obviously not all intelligence officers. There also exists a National Security Bureau (sometimes referred to as the National Security Directorate) headed in the middle 1980s by Ahmad Diab.⁹

THE NON-MILITARY COMPONENT

The major element of the non-military component is known as the General Intelligence Directorate (or State Security), headed by Nazih Zrair until 1984 and commanded by Fuad Abbast in the later 1980s.¹⁰ Subdivided into internal and external branches, in the middle 1980s the internal branch was headed by Mohammed Nassef, while the external branch operated under the authority of Adnan Ram Hamdant.¹¹ Both the internal and external branches of the General Intelligence Directorate have, as a major mission, the ferreting out of the enemies of Hafez al-Assad. The internal branch does this within Syria and the external branch pursues Assad's enemies outside the country.¹²

Being considered an enemy of Assad is apparently not a difficult status to achieve. Daniel Pipes has noted this concisely with respect to members of the press:

Journalists have frequently been victims of Assad's intimidation. Salim al-Lawzi, an important Lebanese publisher, had acquired embarrassing information about internal conditions in Syria, so Syrian agents tortured and killed him. A few months later, Riyadh Taha, president of the Lebanese Publishers Association, was killed by four gunmen in a car. These methods have been used against foreigners, too. After filing stories about unrest in Syria, Reuters correspondent Berndt Debusmann was shot in the back by a

gunman firing a pistol equipped with a silencer. BBC correspondent Tim Llewellyn was threatened by Syrian agents and fled Beirut before being harmed, as did CBS correspondent Larry Pintak.¹³

Other intelligence organizations include Political Security, now headed by General Adnan Badr Hassan; Internal Security, commanded by Muhammad Nassif; and the Special Units, headed by Ali Haidar.* A major mission of the Syrian services is, of course, against Israel. However, there is little evidence of Syrian success against the Israelis. In the early 1970s the Israelis broke up a spy-sabotage organization in the Galilee. The group size was fairly substantial with between 100 and 150 members of both Arab and Jewish backgrounds. The organization was managed by Syrian intelligence.¹⁴

TERRORISM

Most of what has appeared in the open literature concerning Syrian intelligence has touched on its connection with state-sponsored terrorism. Syrian involvement is well documented. Such sponsorship has served Syrian purposes; in furthering Syrian political objectives, it is both cheap and effective. Its very success has caused it to become more and more institutionalized as an instrument of Syrian policy. For example, the Syrian national airline has been used to smuggle arms to terrorist groups in Scandinavia that support Syrian goals.¹⁵ Lebanese and Iraqi sources have noted that Syrian intelligence officers have a regular framework in which they work with various terrorist groups, providing them with certain guidelines. Syrian officers designate both the kinds of targets and countries that are appropriate for attack and those that are not.¹⁶ The Syrians have also been careful to use a fairly extensive system of freelancers, sleepers, and cutouts to cover their tracks.^{17**} While few professionals doubt Syrian involvement in such terrorism, this system provides an element of ambiguity which generally precludes retaliatory political decisions from being taken in targeted countries. Thus, the efforts of Syrian intelligence personnel to cover their tracks with respect to involvement in terror, while not always successful, are at least sufficient to protect the Syrian

*Amnesty International, *Syria 1987*, p. 7. *The Times of London* reported, in its 25 October 1986 edition, that Haidar has a unique headquarters building. Constructed by the East Germans it amounts to an inverted black pyramid (with the usual antenna farm on the roof) astride the highway from the airport into Damascus.

**This was also the case with respect to the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing in December 1988. The action is believed to be a result of an Iranian contract given to the PFLP-GC. Several PFLP-GC personnel were arrested in West Germany in October 1988; most were subsequently released. This included a Jordanian bomb-maker known as Marwan Khreesat (*The Washington Times*, 26 May 1989), who is believed to have constructed the bomb and is now in hiding in Syria (*The Washington Times*, 10 July 1989).

state. The primary surrogates used by the Syrians to carry out terrorist actions are a variety of Palestinian factions as well as several Lebanese groups. These include the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO),* the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine — General Command, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Abu Musa Fatah faction, Samir Ghausha's Popular Struggle Front, Talaat Yagoub's Palestinian Liberation Front, the Lebanon-based Syrian National Socialist Party, and the Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Faction.^{18**}

Syria has provided other types of assistance as well. In 1964, Syrian cooperation helped put an intelligence service together. That year saw the first cooperation between Yassir Arafat and Colonel Ahmed Suwaidani, at the time, head of the Syrian military intelligence. Suwaidani allowed Arafat to access Syrian files on Palestinian refugees, providing an initial data base on which Fatah could build its organization.¹⁹

Since the Khomeini revolution, Syria has worked extensively with Iran in terrorist operations. This cooperation was first noted in the West with the attacks against the American embassy in the spring of 1983 and against the American and French barracks of the Multinational Force in the fall of that year.²⁰

Lebanon is a primary nexus of interaction between the Syrian intelligence services and various terrorist organizations. Two areas, the Bekka, and particularly, Baalbek, have provided secure geographic bases for terrorist organizations whose interests parallel Syria's.^{***}

Syrian assistance has not been limited solely to groups operating out of the Bekka. A report surfaced some two years ago concerning a terrorist team operating out of Cairo with Syrian assistance. Its apparent mission was to cause trouble for Egyptian President Mubarak, whose policy was at odds with Syria. Under the authority of Syrian air force intelligence, the team, numbering about thirty persons, was considered as suspect in the 1986 bomb attack against an American Boeing 727 airliner approaching Athens. The explosive, in this instance, was not the usual Semtex. Instead, it was apparently a quick-drying liquid plastic developed in East

*The two Damascus offices of the organization, under Mustafa Mourad and Abd Rahman Isa, were supposedly moved — under American pressure — some time ago.

**An example of this cooperation can be found in the ANO attack at the Rome and Vienna airports in 1985. According to Jeffrey Richelson in *Foreign Intelligence Organizations*, the Italians (through SISMI, their security service) officially reported in 1986 that the ANO teams had entered Italy via Syria; the Syrians had provided them with both passports and funds.

***This has resulted in some odd concentration of efforts. During the time of the Multinational Force's stay in Lebanon much "private" traffic, such as the explosives used to blow up the BLT headquarters, was trucked over the road from Damascus through the village of Zebdani. For a period of time this Zebdani-Damascus road was among the most photographed on Earth.

Germany or Czechoslovakia, which can bypass normal detection methods. About one pound of this substance, with a micro-timer, was the source of the mid-air explosion.²¹ As demonstrated by this Cairo-based group, terrorists, working with Syrian intelligence, can turn up where they are least expected. For example, the bombing of a Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988, which killed 259 passengers and crew, and 11 people on the ground, has been linked to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine — General Command. The Bush administration has considered taking action against nations, primarily Iran and Syria, which have supported the group.²²

Syria's role in state sponsorship of terrorism has been considerably more circumspect than other countries, such as Iran and Libya. The bulk of Syrian efforts in this regard has sought to strengthen its power base in Lebanon.*

In so doing, Syria has let Iran take the lead in mounting terrorist operations within Lebanon in pursuit of their common goals: the elimination of both Western and Israeli interests in Lebanon. A mechanism of this cooperation has been Iranian influence over the radical Shi'a militias in Lebanon. Varying among the groups, Iran's influence covers the spectrum from advice and financial aid to logistical and administrative assistance, whereas Syrian assistance has often been limited to providing logistical support for the Shi'a. (A general exception to this is Nabi Berri's AMAL militia, which is pretty much left to its own devices.) Most Syrian assistance comes through a few individuals such as Ghazi Kennan or his lieutenants (such as Ali Hammoud who directs Syrian military intelligence in Beirut). Kennan, as the head of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon since 1983, has supervised operations and logistics for the Shi'a from the town of Shtoura (among other venues, such as Zebdani).²³ Operations mounted purely by the Syrians are often directed against their own nationals. Examples go back to the March 1972 assassination of Major General Muhammad 'Umran by Syrian intelligence personnel. Originally a member of the Ba'ath Military Committee in the 1963 coup, he had been living in exile in Tripoli, Lebanon, since 1967.²⁴

Syria has mounted several operations against Iraq, as demonstrated in August 1980 when the heads of other Arab diplomatic missions to Baghdad were summoned to the Syrian embassy to witness Iraqi security personnel remove quite large quantities of weapons and explosives from the embassy.²⁵

*Nonetheless, Arnold and Livingstone have noted that the Syrian Defense Ministry opened a liaison office in Athens in 1983. There has been some concern that the office may be a front to mask operations in Western Europe.

INTERACTION OF THE SECURITY ORGANS

Much has been written concerning the relevance of the Alawi community in modern Syrian political life. Assad's stranglehold on the security organs of his government has been accomplished by placing Alawis who are, for the most part, his relatives in the most sensitive positions. In the mid-1980s they included the following: Jamil Assad (a brother of Hafez), who commanded elite military units in the area of Lattakiyya (the geographic concentration of the Alawi tribes); a cousin, Adnan Assad, controlled the "Struggle Companies" who defended the government's quarters in Damascus;²⁶ the head of military intelligence, Ali Dubi, while not a relative, is an Alawi from Assad's own tribe, the al-Mutawirah.²⁷

Hafez al-Assad remains in power, in part, because of his ability to play his intelligence services off against one another, leading to a variety of alliances within and between the security organs. In 1986, for example, the head of Air Force Intelligence, General Mohammad al-Khouli, was allied with three factions. Al-Khouli was allied with the Foreign Minister, Farouk al-Shara; the chief of staff, General Hikmat Shehabi; and Assad's advisor on military and intelligence matters, General Ali Aslan.²⁸ Opposed to al-Khouli was a faction headed by the Defense Minister, Mustafa Tlas, and the commander of the special forces, General Ali Khaydar. Another faction opposed to the Air Force intelligence chief was the head of military intelligence, Ali Dubi, and the commander of the Army's first division, General Ibrahim Safi.²⁹

CONCLUSIONS

The Syrian intelligence services have been ruthless ferreting out the enemies, real or imagined, of Hafez al-Assad. The events in Hamma and the reports from Amnesty International bear stark witness to that. Assad's Syria is somewhat unusual in the multiplicity of intelligence organs in service to the state. As a general proposition, this is dangerous to a tyrant because each service is a potential source of conspiracy against the regime.

Yet Hafez al-Assad is no fool; his instinct for discovering danger is sharp. The Lion of Damascus has not survived these many years by being oblivious to those around him. The Syrian intelligence services are the "keystone" of the Syrian political arch; without them the arch would crumble. The shape of that keystone is triangular, in representing Assad's management of these security services. One angle represents the traditional functions of such services. The opposite angle represents Assad's reliance on his services to crush dissent. The apex of the triangle represents Assad's playing the various services off against one another to perpetuate his personal power.

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²⁹*Ibid.* p. 8.