

CHAPTER FOUR AGAINST ALL NEIGHBORS

In his play, "Richard III," William Shakespeare describes the title character as a man whose shape and personality make him unsuited for the peacetime pursuit of pleasure. "Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,/Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time/Into this breathing world, scarce half made up," he has no interest in making merry, music, or love. And so he stirs up trouble in the pursuit of power. By plots, dangerous arguments, "prophecies, libels and dreams," he sets others, "in deadly hate the one against the other."

The Syrian regime, in a real sense, is in a similar situation. This is the context in which to understand Ajami's explanation that "Syria's main asset... is its capacity for mischief."¹ The cause is a combination between the country's weakness—its lack of Saudi wealth or Egyptian cohesiveness--and the flawed foundation on which the regime stands. Syria also suffers from a lack of a discreet national history, logical boundaries, or homogeneity sufficient to provide a secure identity of its own without the tempting dream of Pan-Arab empire. The fact that Syria is ruled by a minority community whose Arab and Islamic credentials are suspect to the majority Sunni Moslems also encouraged the rulers' frantic efforts to prove their Arab patriotism and Muslim fidelity.

A state like Egypt or Saudi Arabia could largely turn inward, seeking to cope with its problems by focusing on its own society, because for all their Arab nationalism they are coherent societies. When Egypt walked away from the ambition to lead or rule the Arabic-speaking world in the 1980s, that choice was hardly criticized or even noticed in that country. In contrast, Syrian identity has only been built through the vision of pan-Arab nationalism and foreign entanglements. The country was glued together and found its identity as being the center of Arabism, the core of a great state, the most valiant warrior, the factor that would change everything, the revolutionary force doing battle with reactionaries, the center of resistance, and the champion of Islam. The slogans might change but the actor always remained on stage, issuing calls to arms at the top of his voice.

In this respect, Syria was like a shark, always on the hunt for action and possessing an insatiable appetite. The regime cannot abide regional tranquility because the end of instability abroad would be the beginning of instability at home. The problem is not the specifics of issues but the nature of Syria's system and the regime that runs it. The problems of Egypt and Jordan came from insufficient resources; of Saudi Arabia from the need to manage immense riches, Syria's troubles are political and largely self-made.

There is more of a parallel between Syria and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, though there are differences as well. Being stronger, Iraq's dictatorship was more ready to take open risks, a tendency that eventually undid it. Even so, Saddam could have lived on oil riches and repression; Hafiz and Bashar lacked the former and were too shaky in their minority, outsider status at home to take the latter beyond certain limits. Even a post-Saddam Iraq built on majority rule, whatever its other problems, can live without being the least bit adventurous abroad.

By way of contrast, however, if Syria did not control Lebanon--with or without any direct military presence--it could not continue to live in the style to which it has

become accustomed. In comparison, the Golan Heights is a poisoned treat, far more valuable in its absence as a cause for mobilizing support than in possessing such a rocky provincial dead-end that brings neither glory nor wealth.

States generally seek to avoid conflict and to make peace if possible because they desire to live as a normal country. Syria, though, can only have a degree of normality when wrapped in confrontation. After all, if Syria had been normal it would not be ruled by an Alawite-dominated dictatorship built on an outmoded neo-Communist model incapable of achieving economic or social progress.

In this context, then, did Syria's foreign policy fail or succeed? The basic answer is that it succeeded. After all, Syria achieved total victory on its most important issue, maintaining the regime. Of course, that regime never won the total victories it hoped to achieve. It did not lead the Arabs to national unity or expel Western influence, nor did it destroy Israel, annex Lebanon, or take over the Palestinian movement. Yet Syria used a combination of intimidation and pretended cooperation to overbalance its weakness, maintain the regime at home, block any significant foreign pressure against it, and spread its influence abroad. Syria also succeeded in helping block any solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Not a bad record overall from the standpoint of the Assad government.

Syria's immediate environment, what the Russians call the "near-abroad," was that area it ambitiously called "Greater Syria." It includes Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinians, each of which Syria wanted to include in its sphere of influence and preferably to take over entirely. In Tlas's words, the reason, "Why Palestine and Jordan were just as important for [Hafiz] as Syria," was because he viewed them as part of Syrian territory, refusing to accept the "artificial borders" given Syria by Anglo-French agreements made during World War One.² The same point applied, even more clearly, regarding Lebanon, a country whose independence Syria never recognized and whose common border it refused to delineate.

Beyond this, is the Arab world as a whole, over which Syria claimed to be the rightful leader since it was the most faithful embodiment of the Arab nation. This unity was, after all, the most basic point of Ba'athist ideology, though it was a matter of dispute among Egypt, Iraq, and Syria as to which was the anointed one destined to reunite the shards of the Arab homeland. Again though, for Syria, claiming this role as a key element to justify the regime at home was equally or more important than achieving it.

As a way to legitimize subverting its neighbors, Syria skillfully exploited Arab nationalism's appeal. In this way, Syria could reinvent its blatant pursuit of self-interest into being a noble effort to unite the Arabs in fighting for their rights against Zionism and imperialism. As the Arabs' self-proclaimed most patriotic champion it felt entitled to dictate policy to the Jordanians, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Iraqis.

In this context, the Palestine issue provided Syria with an excuse for taking over Lebanon, isolating Egypt, intimidating Jordan from making peace with Israel, blackmailing Arab oil producers to pay it subsidies; dominating the PLO, being the USSR's main local ally, and excluding Israel from a normal regional role.

Syria's confidence grew when, after Egypt expelled them in 1972, the Soviets made Syria their leading Middle East ally, especially since it provided Mediterranean ports for the Soviet navy. That didn't mean Damascus always listened to Moscow. During the 1970s they disagreed on negotiations with Israel (the USSR wanted; Syria didn't) and Syria's 1976 invasion of Lebanon (Hafiz wanted; Moscow didn't) but the

relationship remained strong. After Syria's defeat in the 1973 war the Soviets provided more and very sophisticated weapons and in the early 1980s, the Soviets helped Syria double the size of its army and gave Hafiz their best, newest arms including advanced tanks and missiles. The Soviets were not always happy with Syria as an advertisement for their stuff, however, as when in 1982, Israel shot down 88 Syrian planes while losing none.³

But when the USSR went down the drain, after a rocky interregnum in the 1990s when Damascus had to pretend to be nice to sole superpower Washington for a while, a new ally-protector was found: Iran. Unlike Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Syria could not really cozy up to the United States as even relative moderation was not its cup of tea. It required a radical, anti-status quo partner.

Toward Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinians, the policies of Tehran and Damascus were close to being identical. Iran could also supply Syria with badly needed money and some day, it seemed likely, with the protection of nuclear weapons. With Bashar now playing the role of pious Shia, it certainly made sense to ally with the world's only other entirely Shia-ruled state. If Syria continued to be isolated in the Arabic-speaking world it didn't matter, having Iran on his side its dictator no longer felt he needed those countries. Bashar could maintain that he was the leading Arab nationalist even when he antagonized every other Arabic-speaking country.

This was the context for Syria's decades'-long effort to dominate its neighbors, though of course policies varied depending on the specific victim next-door and over time. Toward its two weaker neighbors, Syria used all the tools at its disposal to gain hegemony over Lebanon and intimidate Jordan. Doing its Arab "duty," Syria in effect took over Lebanon by sending in its army and ensuring that many Lebanese groups and politicians would obey its orders. Regarding Jordan, Syria followed a more modest strategy of constraining that country from becoming too stable or moderate by both direct threats and the attacks of proxy terrorist groups.

With the Palestinians, Syria tried to take over Fatah and the PLO by creating its own agents, trying to split or at least gain veto power over them. Trying to keep the PLO from making or implementing a diplomatic solution kept the politically profitable Arab-Israeli conflict alive, ensuring it would make no separate peace with Israel that might isolate Syria as the sole intransigent player. This strategy maintained Arab antagonism against the United States and made it easier to seek Damascus's hegemony over the Palestinians.

At the same time, Syria struck at its two stronger neighbors, Israel and Turkey, also using revolutionary terrorist organizations while generally avoiding direct confrontation. It employed Palestinian and Lebanese groups against Israel; Kurdish and Armenian ones against Turkey. Since these targets were non-Arab states, Syria's used Arab nationalism to deny them a normal regional role and the possibility of obtaining Arab allies against its ambitions. Against Israel, the Islamic card could also be played. By maintaining the Arab-Israeli conflict, Syria forced other Arab states to support itself and blackmailed wealthy oil-producing countries into providing financial aid.

As for Egypt and Iraq, its main rivals for Arab leadership, cooperating or competing with them depending on the needs of the moment. Syria also knocked them out of the running, leading an anti-Egypt boycott over Cairo's peace with Israel in the late 1970s and siding with the U.S.-led coalition in 1991 to isolate Iraq after its invasion of

Kuwait. While Syria never had the financial resources or strategic weight to consolidate these advantages, Damascus was always able to ensure that the Arab system protected its interests and supported its stances.

In the end, Syria was the last man standing as the others dropped out of contention for an honor they no longer wanted. By 2003, with Saddam out of power, at last the age of Syria had come or, at least, that's what Bashar thought. His new, improved resistance product--Arab nationalism with the new miracle additive Islam--seemed ready to take the market by storm.

Finally, the Syrian regime was always hostile toward the United States for very good reasons of its own that never really changed over time. Syrian goals favored instability; U.S. interests favor stability. The friends of America—Egypt after the late 1970s, Israel, Jordan, Turkey and an independent Lebanon—were Syria's enemies, rivals, or targets for intimidation. Syria's allies—the USSR, revolutionary groups, Egypt under Nasser, Islamist Iran, and at times Iraq—were also opposed to the U.S. goals and role in the region.

Being relatively weak and usually preferring to avoid direct confrontation, the Syrian regime used covert means for spreading its influence. These channels included bribed politicians (especially in Lebanon); subsidized organizations, and terrorist groups. On the political level, Damascus made use of the Jordanian, Palestinian and Lebanese Ba'th parties as well as the Syrian Social National Party and the Lebanese Islamic Action Front, Hizballah, and many others. It was always preferable to let others fight and die, to have other people's lands, but not Syrian territory, be the scene of carnage and destruction.

The variety of terrorist groups employed by Syria included the fully controlled Palestinian al-Saiqa, Asbat al-Ansar, and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC); the mercenary forces of Abu Nidal; and the usually cooperative Hizballah, Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). To avoid retribution, even these groups often used false names to conceal their identity. For example, the Syrian-controlled al-Saiqa bombed Jewish community centers, stores, and restaurants in France as the "Eagles of the Palestinian Revolution."

One of Syria's deadliest surrogates in attacking Israelis, Palestinians, and others was Abu Nidal, the world's most proficient terrorist-for-hire. In 1974 Sabri al-Banna, Abu Nidal's real name, broke off from Fatah to found the Fatah Revolutionary Council. Syria was one of his main clients. For example, teaming up with another Syrian surrogate group, the Syrian Social National Party, it set off a bomb on April 2, 1986 on board a TWA jetliner flying from Rome to Greece, killing four American passengers and injuring nine others.

This strategy offered Syria a low-cost, low-risk way of waging conflict, hiding behind shadowy connections or front groups that victims could not easily deter or punish. No matter how much it becomes implicated, the regime can simply deny responsibility, and many in the West will believe it or at least use this as an excuse to do nothing. Meanwhile, it can assert to its own people that—at least if the terrorists are Arab—it does support them as heroes involved in a just struggle using acceptable methods.

Finding proof of responsibility for any given terrorist act can be very hard. And even when judicial inquiries proved that the very closest aides of Syria's president had tried to blow up an airliner full of people—as happened in Britain in 1986—or murder a neighboring country's prime minister—as happened in Jordan in 1981 and Lebanon in 2005—few are willing to do anything about it or even remember what happened for very long.

What do you do if the United States secretary of state comes into your office and presents evidence that you are supporting terrorists? Simple. In September 1990, Secretary of State James Baker met with Hafiz and gave him a detailed account of terrorism sponsorship. And Hafiz did do something about it: three Jordanian agents who supplied the information were tracked down and killed. Syria kept on fomenting terrorism; the United States did very little in retaliation.⁴

But it gets even better: precisely six years after his betrayal by Hafiz, Baker was asked by the White House to recommend what U.S. policy should be on Iraq and the Middle East in general. In explaining why he favored dialogue with Syria, Baker recalled the “success” of his 1990 talks with Hafiz in getting Syria to stop sponsoring terrorism.⁵ By 2006, Hamas's top leaders—and the most hardline of all--Khalid Mashal and Musa Abu Marzouq lived under the regime's protection in Damascus, as did Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Shallah. When Hamas kidnapped an Israeli soldier in Gaza in 2006, helping to inspire the Hizballah copycat attack that would set off a Lebanon-Israel war, Mashal announced the operation's success to journalists at a Damascus hotel.

Yet even this pales in comparison to the masterful use of terrorism by Syria in Lebanon in the early 1980s. The jewel in the crown of Syria's campaign to control its neighbors was certainly this almost thirty-year-long domination over Lebanon which was so very profitable for the Syrian elite (through counterfeiting, drugs, and smuggling) and the general populace (through providing support for about one million Syrians through higher-wage jobs in Lebanon). It employed massive doses of terrorism against a dozen targets, including the assassination of not one but two presidents of Lebanon and many other critics there.

These events showed the incredible leverage small groups of terrorists could have on public attention, national policies, and the international agenda. Terrorist attacks and kidnappings set off and extended the Lebanese civil war, led to the Syrian occupation and an Israeli invasion, and drove out the Western forces trying to stabilize the country. The hostage-taking there almost wrecked the Reagan Administration, which abandoned its most cherished principles to negotiate with Iran over freeing Americans being held in Lebanon.

Understandably, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shar'a paid tribute to the efficacy of terrorism by saying, “When a young man sacrifices his life, what power can oppose him?”⁶ Thus, based on this philosophy, Syria consistently provided groups with money, safe havens, propaganda, logistical help, training, weapons, diplomatic support, and protection against retaliation. The ability to receive genuine passports, lavish financing, well-equipped training bases, and state-of-the-art equipment let Middle East terrorists operate in a more frequent, deadly manner than did counterparts elsewhere in the world.

While Syria lost the 1967, 1973, and 1982 wars with Israel, it was also able to carry on indirect terrorism against that country and keep the conflict burning for four decades at little cost. Syria was Arafat's original patron. It always had its own Palestinian surrogate groups, assassinated moderate Palestinian leaders, and maintained its right to

make decisions for the Palestinians. In fact, Syria and its client groups possibly killed more Palestinians than did Israel. In addition, Syria supported a guerrilla war against Iraq by supporting Kurdish nationalist groups, including that headed by the post-Saddam president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani. Equally, Syria was the main foreign backer of the war waged by Kurdish nationalists against Turkey.

Yet despite this long list of depredations, whether successful or otherwise, the cost to the regime was remarkably low. For example, in 1986, a Syrian agent who entered England on a government employees' passport and received an explosive device directly from the Syrian embassy in London used it to try to blow up an El Al passenger plane. His confession implicated Syria's ambassador to Britain, two diplomats, and air force intelligence. The bomb was similar to those employed by a Syrian client group in 1983 bomb attempts against El Al and an explosion killing four Americans on a TWA plane over Greece. Nevertheless, the British response was merely to recall its ambassador home from Damascus for a few weeks.⁷

Rather than being turned into a pariah for its attempt to murder hundreds of people, Syria suffered no punishment at all. But that was not all. Once again the regime played the West for suckers and won. To assuage Britain after the court there found his regime directly involved in the terrorist attack, Hafiz transferred head of air force intelligence General Muhammad al-Khouli to be "only" deputy air force commander as a supposed punishment. After all, the regime maintained that Khouli was acting without authorization from the top. But as soon as the British stopped paying attention, Khouli was promoted to air force commander and kept in that post until his retirement in 1999.

The West should have well understood that personally Khouli was one of Hafiz's closest associates and would never dare organize a terrorist attack without his boss's agreement. But that posed a major problem for the West. For if the president of Syria was personally involved in planning massive terrorist attacks someone might just have to do something about it. Better to pretend that either the problem did not exist or would go away.⁸

This was the response Syria repeatedly hoped for and received. The West was proving the value of covertly sponsored terrorist violence as a priceless instrument of statecraft for the regime, far better than the dangerous, often losing, proposition of using one's own military in conventional warfare. Syrian leaders learned from experience that repeated false denials, stalling, and the tiniest amount of cover could evade any retaliation.

Syria's success in using terrorism and subversion also arose from employing it in a focused way to achieve well-defined, limited goals: gaining hegemony in Lebanon, minimizing U.S. and Israeli leverage there, sabotaging the Arab-Israeli peace process, convincing Syrians their government deserved support for its heroic struggle, and blackmailing wealthy Arab oil-producing states into paying subsidies.⁹

American officials in the 1970s dubbed Yasir Arafat "the Teflon terrorist" for his ability to escape responsibility or punishment for his deeds. In this spirit, Syria could well be called the Teflon country. Whenever Western states considered doing something about Syria's behavior, a combination of loud threats and conciliatory rhetoric discouraged that notion. A final line of defense was the protection of a greater power: the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s, the United States in the 1990s, and Iran thereafter. The only penalties Syria faced were inclusion on the U.S. list of terrorism-sponsoring countries, which restricted some

trade and loans; American sanctions that had little effect; and occasional breaks in diplomatic relations, usually an ambassador's brief withdrawal.

Meanwhile, however, Syria remained the world's biggest center for terrorism, since even many of Iran's sponsorship activities were carried out within its boundaries. Within Syria there were to be found training camps, headquarters, and propaganda centers for a score or more of terrorist groups. In Damascus, their leaders lived secure from any law enforcement organization. Just across the border in Lebanon's Biqa valley, an area directly controlled by the Syrian army for decades, more training camps exist. Hizballah and criminal gangs operated enterprises there for drug-growing and production as well as counterfeiting, especially American \$100 bills. The profits finance part of Hizballah's budget and enriches the Syrian officers who protect these operations.

Syrian money and logistical support was passed directly to terrorist groups by Syrian intelligence organizations which reported directly to the president. For example, Major General Hisham Ikhtiyar, when head of Syria's General Intelligence Directorate and a senior adviser to Bashar, handled the funding of Hizballah and Islamic Jihad. For this and other activities, he was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2006.¹⁰

In theory, of course, the United States was very tough on Syria. In practice, however, things looked very different. During the 1990s, U.S. efforts to get Syria into the anti-Iraq coalition over the Kuwait invasion and then the Arab-Israeli peace process blocked any additional action against Damascus's terrorism sponsorship activities. This was at a time when major sanctions were imposed on Iraq, Iran, and Libya for similar behavior. Even when, after the September 11, 2001, attacks, the United States made the war on terrorism its principal foreign policy strategy, this had little effect on Syria's fortunes. Afghanistan, Iraq, and even Libya paid for their support of terrorism but not Syria, for whom minimal cooperation bought immunity from prosecution. Syria may have been on the U.S. State Department list of terrorism-sponsoring states but it was treated as if it had turned state's evidence and joined the witness protection program.

As if this all were not enough, within two years, Syria was also the only state in effect sponsoring bin Ladin's al-Qaida group, in its main global operation no less. Such a flat statement seems shocking. Of course, Syria had nothing to do with September 11 or regarding direct contacts with bin Ladin himself. Yet Syrian did sponsor the Iraqi insurgency which was increasingly a group led by al-Qaida. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his successors, who ran the insurgency, openly expressed their affiliation to bin Ladin. Syria helped pay, train, arm, cheer, and performed other services for this war. Its history and strategy, however, had not prevented Syria's election to the UN Security Council for a two-year term starting in 2002, even as it was expanding its export of violence.

And what kind of things did this citizen-in-good-standing with the international community actually say and do?

Here is the chairman of the Syrian Arab Writers Association, Ali Uqlah Ursan, giving his reaction to the September 11 attacks. Ursan is not just a bureaucrat but the regime's intellectual mouthpiece, the man who polices the writers, having made himself the association's leader-for-life and expelling those who disagreed with him. While ceremoniously expressing pain at the "deaths of the innocent," his tone suggests that those who died were not innocent. His main theme is one of exultation for, "The fall of the symbol of American power." The Americans were responsible, you see, for the deaths of many innocents in the Arab world, as in Korea, Vietnam, "occupied Palestine"

and Libya “on the day of the American-British aggression,” that is when the U.S Air Force bombed Qadhafi’s palace and his adopted daughter was killed.

But while, of course, America has made many mistakes and committed a few crimes, it should be noted that the United States tried for decades to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict while the Syrians kept it going; that North Korea attacked South Korea in 1950 and the UN sponsored that war against aggression in which America participated; and that Libya was only bombed once in the course of that government’s own long terrorist campaigns which resulted in hundreds of deaths. As for the Palestinians, if they had been willing to make peace in exchange for an independent state on several occasions—a possibility their own leadership rejected and Syria helped sabotage—those deaths would not have happened.

Moreover, despite all the provocation and even terrorism directed by it at the United States, America had never gone after Syria. If the United States was so imperialistic, why had Syria been able to get away with so much without facing an attack by this supposedly ravaging beast? This is a question not answered by the Syrian government, whose brinkmanship was born out of the understanding that Washington was far from the bloodthirsty stereotype it portrayed on a daily basis.

But for Ursan, the apparatchik of a dictatorship that had not hesitated, with his approval, to engage in systematic torture and to level one of its own cities and kill between 10,000 and 20,000 of its own people at one go, at Hama in 1982, his sorrow at more innocent lives lost did not last long. Seeing the masses fleeing in horror in the streets of New York, he intoned:

“Let them drink of the cup that their government has given all the peoples [of the world] to drink from, first and foremost our people...I [felt] that I was being carried in the air above the corpse of the mythological symbol of arrogant American imperialist power, whose administration had prevented the [American] people from knowing the crimes it was committing....My lungs filled with air and I breathed in relief, as I had never breathed before.”¹¹ For him, as he said on another occasion, the United States was “the center of evil.”¹²

If, however, what bothers Ursan is targeting civilians and misinforming one’s people about such murders, he might well listen to his own employer’s official radio station. On October 26, 2005, an Islamic Jihad suicide bomber, an organization whose leadership resides under Syrian government protection a few blocks from Ursan’s office, blew himself up next to a falafel stand in a shopping center in Hadera, Israel, killing five shoppers and injuring more than 30 others. Radio Damascus called this operation a “crushing blow to the Israeli terrorists and war criminals” by a “hero of the Palestinian people.”¹³

Six weeks later, on the morning of December 5, 2005, after Israel had withdrawn completely from the Gaza Strip and the government was discussing a pull-out from the West Bank, another Islamic Jihad suicide bomber blew himself up in a Netanya shopping mall killing five passers-by and wounding more than 50. Radio Damascus could not hide its glee of this response to Israel’s “war crimes” and part of the Palestinian effort to liberate their land.¹⁴ Of course, such operations only postponed Israel’s departure from the West Bank and the creation of a Palestinian state as part of a negotiated peace settlement.

A look at Syria's role in some of this kind of operation shows what sponsoring terrorism actually means. Palestinian students at universities in Arab countries are recruited into Hamas and sent to Syria for training. In camps located in Syria or Syrian-occupied Lebanon, they were trained in firing weapons, preparing bombs for suicide bombers, and kidnapping people, as well as in gathering intelligence for preparing such actions. Among the "heroic" acts of those trained and armed by Syria were two suicide attacks in Netanya in the spring of 2001, with eight Israeli civilians killed and more than 100 injured.¹⁵

At the same moment bin Ladin's men were plotting the September 11 attacks the Syrian-owned PFLP-GC was planning to destroy the high-rise Azrieli Towers in Tel Aviv. Two men were recruited on the West Bank and sent to Syria through Jordan. At the Syrian border, a policeman gave them a brown envelope with the address of the PFLP-GC office in Damascus. They underwent two weeks of training at a camp on using weapons and preparing explosive devices. Returning to the PFLP-GC office they were given plans for various types of attacks including using a suicide car bomber to destroy Israel's tallest building. Weapons and explosives were to be supplied by the top PFLP-GC person in Nablus; ways of communicating with Damascus headquarters were set up. But the two men were only stopped from killing hundreds people, because they were arrested at the Jordan-West Bank frontier on August 7, 2001.¹⁶

Of course Syria's sponsorship of Palestinian terrorism goes back to the 1960s, albeit usually--to reduce the danger of Syria being dragged into a war with Israel--through Lebanon or Jordan. Only on one occasion, November 20, 1974, did PLO terrorists cross from Syria into Israel, attacking a village to kill three students and wound two. The threat of Israeli retaliation, periodically realized, was a strong deterrent when it came to sending terrorists directly from Syria but not if they were dispatched by an indirect route.

While Israel was Syria's most explicit target, other Arabs were also in the crosshairs of its rifle sights. Indeed, it was precisely in order to gain leverage over neighboring Arab states and the Palestinians that the regime so constantly acted as Israel's number-one enemy. Syria viewed itself as the rightful Palestinian leadership and Palestine's legitimate ruler. For Damascus, the Palestine problem was too important to be left to the Palestinians. Just as the USSR claimed to represent the international proletariat's interests, whether the workers liked it or not, Syria styled itself guardian of every Arab issue or cause.

Therefore, the Syrian regime was never merely—despite its statements to the contrary—fighting for the Palestinians' rights but rather waging a struggle to destroy Israel in order to enlarge its own territory. The policy was not one of altruistic or fraternal aid but of imperialism. And since Syria claimed Palestine, it held that Palestinian leaders could not do as they pleased.

In this spirit, Hafiz once told Arafat, "There is no Palestinian people or Palestinian entity, there is only Syria, and Palestine is an integral...part of Syria."¹⁷ The editor of the Syrian newspaper *Tishrin* complained that Arafat's talk of a PLO right to make its own decisions independently was an excuse for making "treasonous decisions.... We will not tolerate freedom to commit treason or to sell out the cause. Palestine is southern Syria."¹⁸ As a result of its interests and policies, then, Syria's goal was not to resolve the

Arab-Israel issue or regain the Golan Heights but to ensure that the conflict continued and that Palestine neither became independent nor fell into the hands of any other Arab state.

There were very good reasons for this policy. A peace settlement would deny Syria its major--even sole--advantage in the inter-Arab struggle and would increase U.S. influence, inevitably favoring Egypt, Israel, and Jordan over Syria. Even if Israel became accepted as a normal regional power, its interests would still clash with those of Syria. Jerusalem would be far more likely to cooperate with Jordan and Egypt, Syria's rivals. In short, Syria's obstructionism and hawkishness were quite logical: peace would make it a second-rate power.

The history of Syrian-Palestinian relations shows how this strategy was implemented following the 1967 war. Ironically, the war represented exactly what Syria had been seeking: an Arab military confrontation with Israel. For 20 years, Arab leaders and orators had daily proclaimed such a war as necessary, inevitable, and certain to end in total Arab victory. Instead, the crisis provoked by Syria and Egypt brought an Israeli preemptive attack which brought as complete an Arab debacle as was possible. In only six days, Israel first destroyed the Egyptian and Syrian air forces, then captured all the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, the West Bank, east Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights.

Disappointed with the PLO's inability to achieve anything and seeking an indirect way to attack Israel given the failure of regular military methods, Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser took on Arafat as a client, helping install him as the new PLO leader.¹⁹ But if Arafat had Egypt he didn't need Syria and in that case Syria needed someone else as its candidate. Syria tried to push Arafat out of Fatah's leadership while also creating its own client groups, al-Saiqa and the PFLP-GC, while ensuring its control over the PLO's Hittin Brigade stationed in its own territory.

When Arafat briefly tried to impose his own control over the brigade in 1969, the Syrians arrested his choice to be its chief of staff when he visited Damascus and forced him to resign.²⁰ Syria did not strike directly against Israel through the Golan Heights and instead routed the operations of terrorists it sponsored through Lebanon, Jordan, or even Europe. While demanding Jordan and Lebanon give the PLO a free hand in their territory, Syria kept it under tight control at home. PLO members there could not wear uniforms, carry guns, or hold rallies except when on missions with Syrian intelligence's permission. Most important of all, they could not cross into Israel or Jordan without written authorization from the defense minister, Assad himself.

In the late 1960s, Arafat's greatest asset, obtained with Nasser's support, was turning Jordan into a virtual PLO base, where the Palestinians could operate freely in attacking Israel and creating a state-within-a-state while ignoring Jordan's own government. By 1970, the PLO and Jordan were coming to a collision. In August Arafat called for a mobilization of all Palestinian forces against Jordan's army and asked Arab states for help against the regime of Jordan's King Hussein. Clearly, he expected assistance from Syria.²¹

King Hussein, too, sought foreign allies against Arafat. He was so desperate that he asked Britain, his family's patron since the early 1920s, to pass on a request to Israel that it stop any Syrian military intervention against him. The British government refused, favoring Arafat over its old friend and assuming he would take over Jordan. Next, the king turned to the United States, which agreed to help, seeing him as an ally against pro-Soviet forces in the Arab world and a force for stability. Israel accepted the request.²²

On September 20, Syria ordered a force made up of the PLA's Hittin Brigade and elements of the Syrian Fifth Mechanized Division disguised with Palestinian insignias to cross the border. But these forces soon withdrew for three reasons: Syria feared Israel's threat to attack, the Jordanians fought back, and the Syrian air force, under Hafiz, refused to support the operation. For Assad, Arafat was an enemy who had sided with his rival, Jadid, while the assault on Jordan was a dangerous adventure.²³

Nasser's death from a heart attack just after negotiating a PLO-Jordan ceasefire robbed Arafat of his patron and eliminated Syria's most powerful Arab rival.²⁴ Egypt's new president, Anwar al-Sadat, wanted to focus on Egypt's internal problems and supported the PLO far less enthusiastically than his predecessor.²⁵ To make matters even worse for Arafat, his old enemy, Assad, deposed Jadid and seized power in Syria.

By April 1971, Arafat was hiding in a cave in northern Jordan. While telling his men to fight to the end, he begged the top Palestinian in Jordan's government, Minister of Public Works Munib al-Masri, to rescue him. Masri traveled with the Saudi ambassador to the north and asked Arafat to return to Amman and meet the king. He agreed. But when the car reached the town of Jerash, Arafat asked to be driven across the border to Syria, from where he made his way to Lebanon.²⁶

So desperate was Arafat that he had to throw himself on the mercy of Hafiz, the man who had helped ensure his defeat in Jordan. Syria gave Arafat personal refuge but was not going to let him drag the country into a war with Jordan or Israel. The Syrians prevented PLO forces from crossing their border with Jordan to continue the conflict against King Hussein but they were willing to let Arafat run a covert war of terrorism. At a meeting in Daraa, Syria, Arafat founded the Black September group as a secret part of Fatah to attack the West and moderate Arab states.

Syria must have known a lot about Black September's subsequent terror attacks, which also suited its interests. Still, this did not mean Hafiz was content to accept Arafat as the Palestinian leader. In 1972, he tried once more to overthrow Arafat by backing Hamdan Ashour, a leftist Palestinian who had built his own army in Lebanon's Bakaa valley and who ridiculed Arafat as insufficiently revolutionary. But again, Arafat emerged victorious.²⁷

But Hafiz did not give up. Syria's strongest counter to Arafat in the 1970s and into the 1980s was al-Saiqa headed by Ahmad Jibril, a Palestinian who had assimilated into the Syrian elite. Born in a village near Jaffa in 1936, he went to Syria as a refugee at age twelve. Graduating from a military academy, Jibril became an engineering officer in Syria's army and a supporter of the Ba'ath.

Meanwhile, Syria was also making one more attempt to fight Israel directly. In October 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack, stunning Israel and challenging its assumed military superiority. Israeli forces were able to counterattack and advance back to the prewar lines by the time a ceasefire ended the fighting after three weeks. Still, many Arabs thought the war regained honor lost in their 1967 military defeat. Sadat and Hafiz had both reached the conclusion, as a result of their defeats, that a conventional war with Israel was a bad idea. But Sadat had then chosen to negotiate a peace deal while Hafiz merely switched to surrogate, guerrilla warfare. The Syrian leader made this decision, in Khaddam's words, "because maintaining the climate of war in the country would hide domestic mistakes."²⁸

Essentially, the war's result was that Egypt had benefited in material terms because Sadat, by showing diplomatic creativity and flexibility, used the crisis to forge an alliance with the United States and to begin a process that resulted in the return of the Sinai. Syria ended up with no such gain because of its intransigence on both the U.S. and Israeli fronts. But Syria had won in strategic terms because its militant, uncompromising posture won it support at home and in inter-Arab politics, as well as offering opportunities to dominate Lebanon and the Palestinian movement.

True, Syria did make a disengagement agreement with Israel in May 1974, following strenuous shuttle diplomacy by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in which Israel returned to the post-1967 lines. It also accepted UN Security Council Resolution 338 ending the 1973 war but it showed no interest in using diplomacy to achieve a peace agreement. Damascus remained a Soviet client. When Sadat made peace with Israel, Syria organized a rejection front which called him a traitor and launched a boycott of Egypt. Concluding that Syrian policy was not going to change for a very long time, Israel's parliament extended Israeli law to the Golan Heights and built Jewish settlements there.

A decade later, in 1982, alarmed by a buildup of conventional PLO forces in southern Lebanon—a parallel to what would happen with Hizballah a quarter-century later—Israel's forces advanced into that country in 1982, defeating both Syrian and Palestinian forces there. The other was the PLO's miserable failure as a military force. On the covert side, Israel made a deal with Lebanese Christian forces dissatisfied with Syrian control of Lebanon and seeking to create a new government.

Hafiz had to take note of two critical elements in the 1982 war. One was Syria's isolation and the growing disinterest in fighting Israel through conventional means, since no Arab state came to its aid during the fighting. The other was the PLO's poor military performance. Arafat's failure offered Hafiz still another occasion to seek control over the PLO. Many Fatah men in Lebanon were outraged by the defeat, blaming Arafat for having promoted commanders known to be corrupt, inept, and cowardly. In January 1983, Said Musa Muragha (Abu Musa), a senior PLO military officer respected for his courage and military ability, castigated Arafat at a high-level Fatah meeting.²⁹

The rebels, fed up with incompetence and wary of moderation, joined hands with Syria. Assad saw the PLO's defeat in Lebanon as his long-awaited chance to take it over. Assad refused to meet Arafat; the Syrian media attacked him. A Syrian leader explained that Arafat thought the Arab states had to support him completely but since Palestine was a cause for all Arabs, "We have the right--especially after the heavy sacrifices we have made for the cause--to discuss, contest, and even to oppose this or that action of the PLO."³⁰

When Arafat fired Abu Musa on May 7, 1983, the rebels responded with the biggest anti-Arafat revolt that had ever taken place in Fatah.³¹ Abu Musa announced, "We are the conscience of Fatah."³² The rebels' declared that armed struggle is the only and inevitable way to revolution."³³

In this battle, Arafat's main card was an appeal to Palestinian patriotism against Syrian meddling. Even while many other Fatah leaders were unhappy with some of Arafat's policies they supported him on this basis. Abu Iyad, the key man whose support the rebellion needed to succeed, explained, "By raising arms against their brothers and shedding Palestinian blood, the dissidents made a big mistake." It was, wrote a Palestinian intellectual, "a Catch-22 situation." The PLO and Fatah leadership had many shortcomings but letting Syrian agents take over threatened to destroy the movement altogether.³⁴

The Palestinian masses agreed with that view. While many of the fighters still in Lebanon joined Abu Musa, Palestinians in Jordan, the West Bank, the Gulf, and elsewhere remained loyal to Arafat. As one Palestinian observer put it, “Arafat is king. If Abu Musa walked through a Palestinian refugee camp [in Jordan], the only people who would follow him would be his own bodyguards.”³⁵

But Abu Musa had a great deal of support among the Fatah troops in Lebanon, the front most important for Assad, as well as the backing of pro-Syrian PLO groups. As the revolt appeared to gain strength, the Syrians became more active. In Damascus, they helped the rebels seize Fatah’s offices and military equipment while arresting Palestinians who supported Arafat. The Syrian media accused Arafat of being “irresponsible” and “arrogant.”³⁶ The rebels went on the offensive in Lebanon, defeating the pro-Arafat forces there. As his men in Lebanon retreated, Arafat offered concessions to the rebels, promising to do just about anything but resign, all to no avail. He also begged help from other Arab states and the USSR, portraying Syria as an American pawn.³⁷

Arafat himself sneaked back to Lebanon to deal with the mutiny in September, using an alias and shaving his beard.³⁸ Shortly after arriving in Tripoli, he called a press conference under a tree in an olive grove. Asked about the revolt, Arafat took out a gold pen from his pocket, “Assad wants my pen. He wants [control over every] Palestinian decision and I won’t give it to him.” Arafat spoke about making Tripoli, as he had previously done of Amman and Beirut, a city he would see destroyed rather than surrender. An American reporter from Texas asked Arafat if this was like the situation at the Alamo, a battle in Texas’ war of independence against Mexico. Yes, said Arafat, it was the same thing because the Palestinians were so brave. The reporter then asked if Arafat knew that all the defenders of the Alamo died. Arafat paused a moment, then said that the Alamo “isn’t all that similar” after all.³⁹

Nevertheless, the Syrians were determined to give Arafat his own Alamo experience in Lebanon or chase him and his remaining supporters from the country. On November 3, Fatah rebels backed by Syrian forces launched a major offensive against Arafat, capturing more Palestinian refugee camps. Arafat’s last remaining stronghold was Tripoli, besieged by Lebanese militia groups and bombarded by Syrian artillery. Over a lunch of chicken stew, a smiling Arafat told visitors he was certain that Assad intended to finish him off but hoped the Saudis would save him.⁴⁰ For the second time in a little over a year, however, Lebanese politicians demanded Arafat leave their country.⁴¹ Yet again, Arafat was easily persuaded not to become a martyr for his cause. In December 1983, Arafat and 4000 of his men were evacuated from Lebanon, saved once again, as they had been the previous year, by U.S. and Israeli guarantees of safe passage.

Within Lebanon and Syria, Hafiz now controlled virtually all the Palestinian assets. In Lebanon, the Syrians had their surrogates launch mopping-up operations with heavy Palestinian losses. In what came to be known as the “war of the camps,” Syrian clients among the Druze, Shia, and Christian militias attacked Palestinian refugee camps, killing perhaps 2000 people.

The price Syria paid for all these operations, however, was a decline in its influence among the Palestinians. Al-Saiqa, its client which had been the PLO’s second-largest group, collapsed due to its involvement in killing so many fellow Palestinians. PLO officers who

fought on Syria's side against the PLO were expelled from that organization. Although badly shaken, the PLO nonetheless survived under Arafat's control.

Hafiz, though, was unrelenting in his anti-Arafat campaign. Algeria and Kuwait, under Syrian pressure, refused to let the PLO hold meetings on their territory. To organize a major conference in November 1984 PNC meeting, Arafat had to beg his old enemy King Hussein to hold it in Amman. The pro-Syrian Fatah rebels denounced this deal with the Jordanian ruler as proving Arafat was a traitor. The Syrian-influenced PFLP and DFLP refused to attend.⁴²

The Syrians were even tougher in going after the few PLO officials who dared express relatively moderate views. In 1984, PLO Executive Committee member Fahd Qawasma, who favored cooperation with Jordan, was killed in Amman. In April 1983, PLO moderate Isam Sartawi was murdered in Portugal by the Syrian-backed Abu Nidal which, as a reward, moved its headquarters to Damascus. The 1986 murders of Palestinian moderates Aziz Shahada and Nablus Mayor Zafir al-Masri were done by PFLP forces operating from Damascus. These and other Syrian efforts helped kill any chance for diplomatic progress and intimidate Jordan from making peace with Israel.⁴³

Only seven years later did this situation begin to change. But when Arafat made the Oslo agreement in 1993 to begin a peace process with Israel, Syria again launched an offensive to subvert that effort through terrorism and to challenge Arafat's leadership of the Palestinians. It encouraged an anti-Arafat revolt in Lebanon led by a Fatah commander, Colonel Munir Maqda.⁴⁴ Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas called Arafat, "the son of 60,000 whores" for allegedly making too many concessions.⁴⁵ Other Syrian leaders used less rude words but also showed their disdain. Throughout the 1990s, Damascus backed Palestinian groups including Hamas that launched many attacks and helped wreck the process, which finally collapsed in 2000 after Arafat rejected the U.S. and Israeli proposals for a negotiated solution and instead launched an armed uprising.

Finally, in January 2006, after Arafat's death removed his powerful presence, the Islamist group Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections. For the first time, the movement's leading group was a Syrian client. In Fatah, the pro-Syrian veteran Farouq Qaddumi became the new leader. Qaddumi explained, "I do not differentiate between Syrian land or Palestinian land irrespective of whether it belonged to this state or that. I am a pan-Arab man."⁴⁶

With the rise of its Palestinian clients to such a large element of power in the movement, Syria had relatively more influence than at any time since the mid-1960s. Finally, the Palestinians' leadership was held by an organization headquartered in Damascus and sponsored by Syria. This effort to control the Palestinian cause had been a consistent theme in its policy, a campaign starting with Fawzi al-Qawuqji and the People's Army in the 1940s, through Arafat and Fatah in the 1960s, to Jibril with the PFLP-GC in the 1970s, Abu Musa in the 1980s, and then to Hamas.

It might seem ironic that after so many decades of backing Arab nationalist groups, Syria would finally reach its goal of maximum influence with an Islamist one. Yet, after all, Syria's long quest for a powerful but pliant client in Lebanon followed a similar trajectory in ending with Hizballah. In turn, the importance and success of this Islamist strategy would have a major effect in turning Bashar toward creating a nationalist-Islamist strategy.

As noted above, the Syrian effort to dominate Lebanon had been as consistent, intense, and even more successful than its attempts to take over the Palestinian movement. Here, too, as in the attempts to control the Palestinians or destroy Israel, the terrorism tactic was a vital tool. Damascus used both its own agents and surrogate groups whose violence intimidated opponents and eliminated rivals. These allies included the Syrian Social National Party, al-Saiqa, and the PFLP-GC. From the 1970s on, dozens of those opposing Syria were killed in Lebanon while not a single pro-Syrian figure was ever murdered by the other side.

The Lebanese civil war gave Syria a chance to send in its army and take over that country. In 1976, just as an alliance of leftists, including PLO and Druze forces, seemed about to triumph there Syria became the Christians' unexpected savior. Worried that a leftist-PLO takeover would produce a stronger radical rival next door and seeing a great opportunity, Hafiz sent in pro-Syrian units of the PLA and his own troops. The PLO, he proclaimed, "does not have any right to interfere in the internal affairs of the host country." Of course, Syria accepted no such limits for itself. Assad obtained Arab League support to allow his troops to enter Lebanon as a "peacekeeping force."⁴⁷ By the end of 1976, the Syrian army occupied two-thirds of Lebanon.

Assad then proceeded to consolidate his control over Lebanon. One of the most effective measures was to eliminate the most determined, charismatic Lebanese leaders who dared oppose Syrian control was extremely effective. Damascus ordered the murder of Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt in 1977, shot in his car, because he was too independent-minded, and President Bashir Jumayyil in 1982 with a bomb just three weeks after his election, because of his dynamism and peace agreement with Israel, which the assassination foiled.

No one was safe. After denouncing Syrian occupation of Lebanon, the country's mufti, its highest-ranking Sunni cleric, Hassan Khalid, was killed on May 9, 1989. On November 22 of that year, newly elected President René Moawad became the second Lebanese president to be killed, along with 23 others nearby, by a car bomb.

By terrorizing Arab and Western journalists, Syria also ensured there would be no critical coverage of its policies, at home or in Lebanon. In 1980, for example, one of the most outspoken editors, Salim al-Lawzi, editor of al-Hawadith, made a visit home from the exile into which he had fled after earlier threats on his life. He was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered.

But the principal use of Syrian-sponsored terrorism within Lebanon—in conjunction with its ally, Iran--was to force the withdrawal of Israeli, U.S., British, and French troops in the 1982-1984 era. Although the actual work was largely performed by Iranian-backed Islamist groups, Syria gave them freedom to train, operate, and transport bombs through Syrian-held territory as well as other logistical support.

Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, a multi-national force was sent into the country composed mostly of American and French troops to try to reestablish peace there. If they had remained in the country, the Western states would have become the key power in Lebanon, ending both Syria's control there and its ability to use that country to heat up the conflict with Israel whenever it wished to do so. Instead, Syria, along with Iran, helped their clients unleash a wave of terrorism which killed many American, French, and Israeli soldiers. Westerners in Lebanon were taken hostage by terrorist groups.

These attacks included some of the biggest terrorist operations in history. On April 18, 1982, carrying out a plan organized by members of the incipient Hizballah group, a terrorist drove a van loaded with 400 pounds of explosives into the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people and wounding 120. Seventeen of the victims are Americans, including a number of CIA analysts.

Then, on October 23, 1982, two simultaneous bomb attacks on military headquarters in Beirut kill 242 American Marines and 58 French servicemen. Suicide terrorists from radical Islamist groups supported by Iran and Syria, drove two trucks, each carrying 400 pounds of dynamite wrapped around glass cylinders, through the security perimeter of the U.S. Battalion Landing Team headquarters and the French paratroopers' base four miles apart. The subsequent withdrawal of the multi-national force and lack of any international challenge to Syrian domination of Lebanon owed a great deal to this campaign of violence.

Sometimes the suicide bombers hardly bothered to conceal their links to Syria. In July 1985, for example, a 23-year-old Lebanese named Haytham Abbas blew up himself and his car at a checkpoint of the Israel-backed South Lebanese army. The previous day, Abbas, a member of the Lebanese branch of Syria's ruling Ba'th party, had given a television interview praising Hafiz (whose picture was visible on his desk and wall in the videotape), calling him "the symbol of resistance in the Arab homeland and the first struggler."⁴⁸ Other suicide terrorists were members of the Syrian-controlled Syrian Social National Party. Also during this period, Hizballah was being built up as a force to organize the Lebanese Shia population and to fight the continuing Israeli presence in the south.

As disorder proliferated and the Lebanese civil war continued, the international community, the United States, and Israel—as well as many in Lebanon itself—were literally begging Syria to take control and restrain the violence. The Western forces quickly withdrew from Lebanon. As a favor, Syria later helped free some of the hostages who were being held by pro-Syrian groups—those who weren't murdered—and was warmly praised for this good deed. To defeat your adversaries is one thing; to get them to thank you for it and beg you to take the prize you want is deserving of a gold medal at the international affairs' Olympic games.

Using terrorists to chase Western forces out of Lebanon and get them to back Syrian control of the country as a way to keep things calm was, however, only phase one of the regime's plan. Once Syrian control was reestablished and reinforced, then Vice-President Khaddam later recalled, Hafiz decided "to start a war of attrition against Israel [from] Lebanon...based on a conviction that a traditional war was not possible." The Syrians would carefully avoid any operations raiding into Israel from the Golan Heights, lest this lead to an Israeli attack on Syria itself, and channel all the operations through Lebanon using Hizballah for that purpose.⁴⁹

Thus, the independent-minded PLO had been displaced by a Syrian-directed Hizballah as the dominant group confronting Israel. For the first time, Syria really controlled the south Lebanon front against Israel. The man at the center of this spider web was Syria's intelligence chief there from 1982 to 2003, General Ghazi Kanaan. He was nothing less than an imperial viceroy whose word was law in Lebanon, sufficient to kill or arrest anyone, veto any decision made even by the highest Lebanese politician, and make or break any of them. An Alawite from a village near Hafiz's hometown and

belonging to a family allied to the Assads, he came from the heart of the regime's establishment.

Kanaan's great achievement was to build links to prominent Lebanese political and militia leaders, including many who had been long opposed to Syrian influence. His most impressive conquest in this respect was the Christian nationalist Lebanese Forces, whose leaders had been responsible for the 1982 massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. Kanaan used this wide variety of surrogate forces to destroy the May 17, 1983, U.S.-mediated Lebanon-Israel peace agreement and drive out the international force that had arrived in an attempt to end the civil war. Those Lebanese who resisted were killed, kidnapped, or learned how to behave properly toward Damascus from seeing what happened to those who didn't.

One of Lebanon's leading intellectuals, living abroad, tells of an experience that shows Kanaan's omnipotence. He was invited back for a visit to Lebanon by the current president's son, who even offered to send a private plane to bring him. The man called his elderly aunt in Beirut to ask her opinion. "Don't come!" she insisted. "It doesn't matter who is your host. If a Syrian sergeant wants to arrest you even the president of Lebanon can't do anything about it."⁵⁰

Not only did Syria control Lebanon, it had managed the situation so well that everyone in the world pretty much accepted this situation. The Syrian position, which was only partly true, was that it had been invited in by the Lebanese government. Of course, with Syria largely controlling the Lebanese government thereafter nobody was going to invite it to leave. And Bashar's view of this bilateral relationship could scarcely be comforting to other Arab states: "We consider our relationship with Lebanon," he explained, "an example of the relationship that should exist between two brotherly countries."⁵¹

Even Israel accepted the Syrian military presence as long as that army did not cross certain "red lines." These included keeping its army out of the far south, not putting anti-aircraft missiles into Lebanon, and not interfering with Israel's planes overflying Lebanon or its ships watching the Mediterranean coast. Mostly, Damascus abided by this unofficial agreement but it periodically tested them.

For example, in January 1977, a Syrian army battalion moved into the south but was withdrawn when Israel threatened to attack it. Four years later, there was a crisis when Syria moved anti-aircraft missiles into eastern Lebanon. This move was one factor prompting the 1982 war. While Syria lost militarily, the war ultimately had no effect on Syria's domination of Lebanon. Thereafter, it used terrorism to chase U.S. and European soldiers out of the country and to harass Israeli-backed Lebanese forces which controlled the far south.

In 1985, Syria again installed anti-aircraft missiles in Lebanon but Israeli threats backed up by U.S. support got them removed within three months. During 1993 and 1996, Israeli air strikes hit Hizballah bases and on one occasion a Syrian position in Lebanon. War raged between Hizballah and Israel's clients, the South Lebanese Army. But Damascus was careful to avoid a direct war with Israel, just using its position in Lebanon to strike at that country indirectly and at minimal cost.

Control over Lebanon was valuable for Syria in a defensive sense inasmuch as the army's presence there made it harder for Israel's army to advance north into Lebanon and then swing eastward across the border into Syria. More immediately, Syrian strategy

made it easy for Syria to keep up pressure on Israel by indirect attacks. Most important of all, Lebanon produced the loot needed to keep the Syrian regime afloat at home and to enrich its elite in the face of Syria's own mismanaged economy.

Syria had much less success projecting influence on Jordan, after the foiling of its direct attempt at military conquest in 1970, or Turkey. Officially, the Syrian regime recognized Jordan as an independent state but still hoped to absorb it some day into its intended empire. Assad declared in 1981: 'The reactionary regime of Jordan was established on a part of the Syrian lands, on part of the Syrian body. We and Jordan are one state, one people, one thing. ...'⁵² For its part, Jordan successfully sought protection from the United States, Egypt, Iraq, and even covertly from Israel at various times. Moreover, since the country had a strong central government and a charismatic ruler in King Hussein, it was far harder to subvert than Lebanon.

Nevertheless, during the 1980s, Damascus was quite successful in using intimidation to prevent Jordan from moving toward peace with Israel. In 1981-1983 and 1985-1986, Syria organized numerous attacks on Jordanian diplomats and airline offices abroad to deter any progress. The most daring operation was the sending of a hit squad in 1981 to kill Jordanian Prime Minister Mudar Badran in Amman. The group was captured and forced into making a three-hour public confession on Jordanian television. But again Syria paid no price for such behavior. The next year, a half-dozen terrorist teams were sent to Europe to hit Jordanian targets and critics of Syria there. One of them was caught in Germany; another blew up an Arab newspaper in Paris killing a passer-by. Again, Syria suffered no punishment despite clear evidence of direct government involvement in this operation.⁵³

In 1983, a wave of attacks by Syrian-sponsored groups killed Jordanian diplomats in Spain and Greece, and wounded Jordanian ambassadors to India and Italy. In 1985, a rocket was fired at a Jordanian airliner taking off from Athens, the Jordanian airline's office in Madrid was attacked, a diplomat was killed in Ankara, and a Jordanian publisher was murdered in Athens. As soon as Jordan's King Hussein gave up the idea of serious negotiations with Israel, however, the assaults ceased. A decade later, Syria could not prevent the signing of a Jordan-Israel peace treaty in 1994.

In general and despite economic incentives for good relations, Syria and Jordan rarely got along well. In fact only in the late 1970s (when both were quarreling with Egypt and Iraq at the same time) and for a short period around 2000 did the two have good relations. The problem arose not only due to Syrian ambitions but also from the gaps between Syria, a radical republic allied with the USSR, and Jordan, a conservative monarchy linked to the United States. They also backed different sides in Persian Gulf conflicts. During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, Syria supported the former and Jordan the latter. At the time of the 1990-1991 crisis over Iraq's seizure of Kuwait, Jordan (intimidated by Saddam Hussein) feared angering Baghdad; Damascus was on the side of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.⁵⁴

After both Hafiz and King Hussein died, however, the latter's successor, King Abdallah II, thought he could get along well with his fellow young ruler, Bashar, who he mistakenly saw as a Western-oriented, high-tech-loving reformer. It didn't take Abdallah long to realize that Bashar was a wolf in internet surfer's clothing. Jordan thus fared quite differently from Lebanon. But with a few twists of fate things might have turned out quite differently.

Syria's neighbor Turkey was a tough country in its own right and rather too large (not to mention non-Arab) for Damascus to ever consider swallowing. Still, Syria wanted to keep it off-balance and too preoccupied to intervene in the Middle East. As a result, Syria backed Armenian and later Kurdish terrorists of the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party) against Turkey. The PKK was headquartered in Damascus and received ample help from Syria in waging a war that cost tens of thousands of casualties in southeastern Turkey. Finally, in 1998, the Turks would go to the verge of war with Syria to get Damascus to desist. The Turks won and Syria expelled the PKK's leader. This provided a rare case of a neighbor so credibly threatening Syria as to force it to back down.

Over a period of decades, and with a wide outcome ranging from full success (Lebanon), through success at constraining (Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and the Palestinians) to ultimate failure (Turkey), Syria tried to destabilize all its neighbors and conducted what amounted to a permanent covert war against them. Only in Lebanon did Syria gain control of its intended prey, but these efforts severely disrupted the region and caused a huge amount of bloodshed, as well as triggering wars with Israel and several major crises.

This strategy did not emerge from heartfelt grievances or misunderstandings but rather due to the needs of the Syrian regime at home and its ambitions abroad. Nothing could bring an end to this general hostility as long as the Assad regime and an Arab nationalist ideology ruled in Damascus.

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² Radio Damascus, July 20, 2000. Cited in Eyal Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria," Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 42, No. 2, March 2006, p. 87.

³ Martha Neff Kessler, Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power, (Washington DC, 1987), Washington, D.C.), p. 114.

⁴ New York Times, February 7 and March 12, 1991.

⁵ "This Week With George Stephanopoulos," October 8, 2006.

⁶ Al-Jazira TV December 28, 2005. MEMRI, Clip No. 981, December 28, 2005. <http://memritv.org/Transcript.asp?P1=981>.

⁷ Washington Post, June 1, 1986.

⁸ Al-Hayat, June 14, 1999. See Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in Ami Ayalon, Middle East Contemporary Survey, Vol. 10, 1986-87, (Boulder, Co., 1989), pp. 606-607; and in Ami Ayalon, Middle East Contemporary Survey, Vol. 11, 1987 (Boulder, Co., 1989), pp. 636-637; and in Ami Ayalon, Middle East Contemporary Survey (NY, 1994) p. 617; Andrew and Mitrokhin, op. cit., p. 198.

⁹ Jim Hoagland, "A Clean Slate for Syria?" Washington Post, September 19, 1987.

¹⁰ U.S. Treasury Department Press Release HP-60, August 15, 2006; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/05/20040511-6.html>.

¹¹ Al-Ushbu al-Adabi, September 15, 2001. Translation in MEMRI No. 275, September 25, 2001, <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP27501>.

¹² Though it tells something about the state of Arab politics that even he admitted the regimes would do nothing more than issue statements of protest. Kul al-Arab, January 2, 2004. Translation in MEMRI, No. 646, January 19, 2004. http://www.memri.org/bin/opener_latest.cgi?ID=SD64604.

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- ¹³ Radio Damascus, October 27, 2005. Cited in Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies (C.S.S), "Syrian Media Glorify the Terrorist Suicide Bombing in Hadera," October 30, 2005. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/syrian_gl.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ Radio Damascus, December 5, 2005, cited in Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies (C.S.S), "The Palestinian Islamic Jihad carries out another suicide bombing attack..." December 6, 2005. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/pij_e1205.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ Reuven Erlich, "Terrorism as a Preferred Instrument of Syrian Policy," October 10, 2001. <<http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=400>>.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. See also Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center report, April 4, 2005 <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia//ENGLISH/COUNTERTERRORISM-DATA/PDF/APR13_05.PDFBulletin>.
- ¹⁷ Kamal Junbalat, I Speak for Lebanon (London, 1982), p. 28.
- ¹⁸ Seale, Assad of Syria op. cit., p. 348; Tishrin, July 9, 1983.
- ¹⁹ Mohammed Heikal, The Road to Ramadan, (NY, 1975), pp. 63-64.
- ²⁰ Moshe Shemesh, The Palestinian Entity: 1959-1974: Arab politics and the PLO, (Totowa, N.J, 1988), pp. 116-117.
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- ²⁴ James Lunt, Hussein of Jordan: a Political Biography, (London, 1989), p. 144; Gowers and Walker, op. cit., p. 87; Anthony Nutting, Nasser, (NY, 1972), p. 475; Abu Iyad, op. cit., p. 90.
- ²⁵ Muhammad Heikal, Road to Ramadan, (NY, 1975), p.121.
- ²⁶ Gowers and Walker, op. cit., p. 84.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 63; Sobel, op. cit., p. 14.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Al-Majalla, December 4, 1982, Damascus television, December 15, 1982, (BBC, Survey of World Broadcasts, December 17, 1982); Abu Musa, NIN (Belgrade), October 30, 1983, translation in U.S. Department of Commerce, Joint Publications Research Service, November 22, 1983.
- ³⁰ Eric Rouleau, "The Future of the PLO," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 62 No. 1 (Fall 1983, p. 145.
- ³¹ The rebels' political leaders included PNC chairman Khalid al-Fahoum, and Nimr Salah (Abu Salah), a Marxist founder of Fatah who had been the PLO's liaison and arms supplier to the Lebanese left.
- ³² Al-Watan, May 26, 1983; al-Anba, October 3, 1987..
- ³³ See the text of the statement in FBIS, May 17, 1983, p. A4.

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- ³⁴ Yezid Sayigh, "Fatah: The First Twenty Years," Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 13 No. 4 (Summer 1984) p. 115; al-Anba, October 3, 1987. See also Fouad Moughrabi, "The Palestinians After Lebanon," Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 3, Summer 1983, p. 211.
- ³⁵ Adam Garfinkle, "Sources of the al-Fatah Mutiny," Orbis, Vol. 27, Fall 1983, p.637
- ³⁶ In addition to their long-standing hatred of Arafat and clash of interests in Lebanon, the Syrians may have also wanted revenge for Arafat's help to Islamist revolutionaries within Syria, another possible example of his meddling in the politics of Arab states. Tishrin, June 25, 1983; al-Thawra, June 30, 1983.
- ³⁷ Garfinkle, op. cit., Rouleau, op. cit., pp.142-43; Robert Baer, See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism, (NY, 2002), p. 124; Washington Post, June 14, 1983.
- ³⁸ Bassam Abu Sharif and Uzi Mahnaimi, Tried by Fire, (London, 1995), p. 205.
- ³⁹ Thomas Friedman, From Beirut to Jerusalem (NY, 1989), p. 174.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ William Harris, Faces of Lebanon: Sects, Wars and Global Extensions, (Princeton NJ, 1997), p. 184.
- ⁴² Text, Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 14, No. 3, (Spring 1985), p. 201.
- ⁴³ Text of testimony of Phil Wilcox, State Department Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, House International Relations Committee, July 25, 1996. On King Hussein's charges against Syria, see Palestine Report, August 16, 1996.
- ⁴⁴ Agence France-Presse, August 24, 1993, in FBIS, August 24, 1993; New York Times, August 25, 1993.
- ⁴⁵ Tlas as quoted in al-Safir and Daily Star, August 3, 1999. The Syrian media only covered Tlas's denial of making such comments.
- ⁴⁶ Al-Hayat, August 20, 1995 in FBIS August 25, 1995.
- ⁴⁷ Adeed Dawisha, "Comprehensive Peace in the Middle East and the Comprehension of Arab Politics," Middle East Journal, Vol. 37, 1983, pp. 147-8.
- ⁴⁸ Damascus radio, July 16, 1985, in FBIS July 16, 1985.
- ⁴⁹ Al-Mustaqbal TV, August 27, 2006. Translation in FBIS GMP20060828622001.
- ⁵⁰ Interview.
- ⁵¹ Inaugural speech, July 17, 2000, Syrian News Agency. Translation in MEMRI No. 116, July 21, 2000.
- ⁵² Tishrin, January 11, 1981.
- ⁵³ Andrew and Mitrokhin, op. cit. pp. 211-212.
- ⁵⁴ Curtis R. Ryan, "The Odd Couple: Ending the Jordanian-Syrian Cold War," Middle East Journal, Winter 2006 (Vol.60, No.1), pp. 33-56.