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**Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center
at the Center for Special Studies (C.S.S)**

Syria as strategic support for Hamas

Overview

- ◆ In the early morning of June 28, Israeli Air Force planes flew over Bashar Assad's summer residence near the northwestern Syrian city of Latakia. President Assad was there at the time. The flight was intended to send a threatening message to the Assad and the Syrian régime, which provide sponsorship and support for Hamas and the other terrorist organizations which direct their terrorist activity in the PA from Damascus.
- ◆ This Bulletin examines Syria as a provider of strategic support for Hamas, with the abduction of the Israeli soldier Corporal Gilad Shalit and Operation Summer Rains in the background.



Terrorist summit in Damascus: the Syrian president welcomes the Iranian president (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, January 20, 2006).

Syrian support for Hamas

- ◆ **Syria and its ally, Iran, employ a consistent strategy** of supporting the Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist organizations out of a profound belief in the efficacy of the path of “resistance” (i.e., terrorist activities). They also consider it a way to achieve a variety of goals, among them:
 - **Reinforcing of the radical Iranian-Syrian axis** in the Middle East;
 - **Weakening Israel** by creating rifts in society and damaging the economy;
 - **Strengthening radical Islamic** forces in the PA by undermining Abu Mazen and pragmatic Palestinian elements;
 - **Sabotaging any chance for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement** or a renewal of the peace process (especially since the Syrian track is not incorporated into it).

- ◆ Syria therefore provides sponsorship and support for **Hamas**. The movement’s “**external**” leadership sits in **Damascus**, where, after it was expelled from Jordan in 1999, it received permission from the Syrian régime to operate from within its borders. **Today, that Damascene “external leadership” is the movement’s leading authority.** It traditionally holds **positions more inflexible and extremist** than the “internal” leadership in the PA, the result of its alienation from the needs of the Palestinian people and its proximity to Iran and Syria. **The Syrian régime** maintains close ties with the Hamas leadership, through both high political echelons and senior members of the Syrian security services.¹

¹ For further information see our Information Bulletin entitled “Syria 2004: Ongoing support of terrorism, non-conventional weapons build-up, continuing violations of human rights,” at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/ENGLISH/SYRIA%20AND%20LEBANON/PDF/JULY_04.PDF.



Left: President Assad conferring with Khaled Mashal in Syria after the Hamas electoral victory. Right: The figure in the center is ‘Imad al-‘Alami, responsible for Hamas’s terrorist-operations, in an exception public appearance (Syrian TV, January 29, 2006).

◆ Head of Hamas’s Damascus leadership are **Khaled Mashal**, chief of the organization’s **political bureau** and his deputy, **Musa Abu Marzuq**, who was deported by the United States. They are aided by members of Hamas’s operational headquarters, led by **‘Imad al-‘Alami**. Bashar Assad’s régime enables them to **direct Hamas policy in the PA from Syria**, including terrorist-operational activity. Thus **the real focus of Hamas power** is in Damascus, where Khaled Mashal operates under Syrian aegis, and **not** in the **PA** with **Ismail Haniya**. It is Khaled Mashal who dictates Hamas terrorist policy in the PA, even if he does consult with the “internal” leadership.



Khaled Mashal (Hamas Website, March 2006)

- ◆ The **Damascus-based direction and support of terrorist activities** are carried out in a variety of ways:
- There is an uninterrupted flow of **political and operational instructions** sent to Hamas operatives in the PA, including the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas’s terrorist-operative wing;
 - There is a **transfer of funds** in amounts reaching tens of millions of dollars a year, which pay for Hamas’s activities, including terrorist attacks;

- Terrorist-operatives are **trained in Syria**² and aid is provided to **purchase weapons**, which are then smuggled into the PA and the Arab states.³



Some of the weapons the Jordanians found in the possession of the Hamas terrorists. The Jordanians stated that the terrorists had been trained and funded by senior Hamas leaders in Syria (Jordanian TV, May 2006).



From an Israeli Channel 2 interview Ehud Ya'ari conducted with Osama Matar, a resident of the Jabaliya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip who underwent military training in Syria: Question: Where did the training take place? Answer: Syria. Question: Where in Syria? Answer: Damascus.

² For the arrest of Hamas operatives who trained in Syria, see our Information Bulletin entitled “The Syrian régime allows Palestinian terrorist organizations to train operatives to perpetrate attacks on Israel...,” at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/ENGLISH/COUNTERTERRORISM-DATA/PDF/APR13_05.PDF.

³ In April 2006, the Jordanians arrested a group of Hamas terrorists in the final stages of preparations for carrying out attacks and smuggling weapons into the West Bank. The terrorists had a large number of weapons in their possession at the time of their arrest. The Jordanian government stated that during interrogation the terrorists admitted their activity had been directed by the Hamas leadership in Syria.

◆ In the past, primarily because of American and international pressure, from time to time the Syrian régime made its links to Hamas and the other terrorist organizations less visible. However, **during the past two years the régime has defiantly and openly strengthened its ties with Iran and the various terrorist organizations, and has not hesitated to publicly express the fact.** For example, Assad's September 2005 media-covered meeting with the heads of the Palestinian terrorist organizations (Hamas, the PIJ, PFLP-GC, PFLP, Al-Saiqa, PDFLP, Fatah/Intifada, etc.) should be noted in that context.

Strengthening the Syrian régime's ties with Hamas

◆ The Syrian régime was openly pleased with the Hamas victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006 and with the formation of the Hamas government. The reasons for that were the following:

- Syria viewed the Hamas victory as a victory for the "resistance" (i.e., terrorism) and as a defeat for Israel and American Middle East policy;
- The Syrian régime saw an opportunity to play a more central role and have more influence on the developments in the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, especially at Egypt's expense;
- The Syrian régime hoped that it would be able to use the Hamas victory and the movement's influence as levers to lessen international pressure being exerted on Syria.

◆ For that reason, since the January elections, Syria's activity has significantly increased in the Palestinian arena with the hope of **exploiting the new situation to advance its own interests.** That was manifested in several areas:

- **Politically**, the Syrian régime increased its coordination and updating meetings with various levels of Hamas representatives, including frequent meetings with **Khaled Mashal** and Assad's media-covered meetings with senior members of the Palestinian government, such as foreign minister **Mahmoud al-Zahar**, minister of the interior **Sa'id Siyam** and others. All that was done to

send the message that Damascus held a “terrorist card,” while it formally denied any responsibility for the terrorist attacks carried out in Israel and the PA.

- **With regard to terrorism**, the Syrian régime **encourages the continuation of a terrorist campaign against Israel** (the *intifada*) and supports the Syrian-based headquarters of Hamas and other terrorist organizations. It is also involved in forming Hamas terrorist policy vis-à-vis the “internal” leadership, **including returning Hamas to the track of the terrorist attacks, after more than a year during which the movement was not officially involved in doing so.**⁴

- **Economically**, Syria, sponsored by Assad, has launched a pan-Arab campaign to raise funds for the Hamas government and has even set up “popular committees” to collect money.

◆ The Hamas leadership in Damascus dictates terrorist attack policy to the Hamas infrastructures in the PA. Thus it plays a central role in **everything concerning the terms for the release of the abducted soldier**. It does that by maintaining direct contact with Hamas’s terrorist-operative infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, headed by **Muhammad Diyab Ibrahim Def**, and his second in command, **Ahmad Sayid Khalil Ja’abari**.

⁴ A manifestation of terrorist encouragement was the June 26 Radio Damascus broadcast praising the attack at Kerem Shalom and representing it as “continuing the intifada after the [so called] lull [in the fighting] went bankrupt.”