

Syria Says No to Bombs

By [Sami Moubayed](#)

Far from achieving the intended blow against Al-Qaeda and Sunni insurgents in Iraq, the recent American incursion into Syrian territory on the border with Iraq undermines voices of moderation in Syria, and facilitates the recruitment efforts of extremist Islamist groups, in a country that has every reason to be wary of the terrorist threat, says Syrian analyst Sami Moubayed.



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Back in 2003, Syria-observers in Washington claimed that Syria was bluffing when it said that Damascus was facing a terrorist threat from al-Qaeda and its sister organizations. Syria was inflating the terrorist threat - they argued - to convince the Americans that Washington and Damascus had a common enemy in fundamentalist organizations preaching militant Islam, and to deflect charges of being a supporter of terrorism itself, making it a potential target for what back then appeared to be a comprehensive strategy of “regime change” across the region.

Syria in the Crosshairs of Islamist Terror

Five years on, the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq has turned out to be the main driving forces fueling militant Islam in the entire region, and terrorism has finally hit Syria in earnest, with a suicide bombing carried out in Damascus on September 27 by a religious fundamentalist emerging from the wilderness of northern Lebanon. On that Saturday, a burgundy GMC with an Iraqi license plate came crashing near a security complex in the Sidi Miqdad neighborhood, on the road to Damascus Airport. Seventeen Syrians were killed — in addition to the Saudi suicide bomber — and 65 were injured in the deadliest terrorist attack to hit the Syrian capital since the early 1980s. The blast sent shivers down the spine of all Syrians. This was not just another terrorist attack in war-torn Baghdad. Nor was it yet another explosion in Beirut, a city that has gotten accustomed to violence since the civil war broke out in 1975. This was taking place in the heart of Damascus, for long considered by many to be the safest city in the Arab world.

Thanks to strong security, it was believed, al-Qaeda had not been able to infiltrate Syria or carry out any deadly operations such as the infamous bombings that claimed some 60 lives in the Jordanian capital Amman back in 2005. Long years of safety contributed to a general feeling that “things like that just don’t happen in peaceful Syria.” September 27 — or what the Syrians immediately coined “Black Saturday” - proved them wrong and showed that terrorism, which was

common in Baghdad, Beirut, Riyadh, and Amman, had now reached the doorsteps of Damascus.

Several theories immediately surfaced. One said that the real target was a nearby Shiite shrine frequented daily by pilgrims from Iran and Iraq. The fact that the vehicle used for the attack had an Iraqi license plate made many believe that Sunni militants from Iraq were behind the blast. Another theory said that the security complex where the explosion occurred was indeed the real target of the terrorist, pointing to an intention to directly hit at the security institutions of the Syrian state.

The Lebanese Link

On November 6, Syrian State TV put an end to speculation when it broadcasted the confession of twelve terrorists who claimed to be behind the September 27 bombing. Ordinary people watching the news were surprised to hear that there was an “Al-Qaeda branch” in Syria and horrified to learn that ordinary Syrians like them had wasted innocent lives at Sidi Miqdad. One of the terrorists was a 24-year old smuggler plying the mountain tracks between Syria and Lebanon. Another was an engineering student at the University of Kalamoon, a new private school in Syria. A third was a dental expert, and the fourth an IT specialist.

The hit team was a combination of Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese, including Wafa, the daughter of Shaker al-Absi, founder of Fatah al-Islam, the very same organization that back in 2007 battled the Lebanese Army in the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr al-Bared camp in northern Lebanon for more than three months. The person who drove the dynamite-filled GMC into its target was a Saudi named Abu Aysha, they confessed, claiming that they were looking at targets “to harm the Syrian regime.” They had planned to hit the Central Bank of Syria, and gun down Italian and British diplomats based in Syria.

But they also hinted at much wider implications: according to Wafa Absi, the only woman among the group, her father — in hiding since 2007 — had received funds from the Future Movement in

Lebanon, headed by parliamentary majority leader Saad al-Hariri. Her account basically repeated – and, arguably, confirmed – an account published in May 2007 by veteran US journalist Seymour Hersh, whereby Fatah al-Islam, the organization now blamed for the September 27 bombing in Syria, had been co-opted by Saudi National Security Advisor Bandar Bin Sultan and US Vice-President Dick Cheney. According to Hersh, the objective was to create a Sunni military wing to combat Hizbullah, if worse came to worse in Lebanon. But contrary to expectations, the group rebelled against its foreign master minds and took up arms in the Lebanese city of Tripoli back in 2007. For the Syrians, the conclusion was clear: The Future Movement of Saad Hariri, driven by their urge to avenge the alleged Syrian role in the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik El-Hariri – an accusation that Syria of course staunchly denies - had armed and dispatched some elements of Fatah al-Islam to carry out the Syria attack. The Hariri team immediately fired back, accusing the Syrians of having created Fatah al-Islam in order to wreak havoc in Lebanon, and called the televised confessions “false accusations designed to politically assassinate us, as a prelude to physical assassination.”

The Trail of Islamist Terror in Syria

Either way, what matters is how strongly threats perception changed in Syria. Overnight, ordinary Syrians began to recall a long series of events since 2003, which seem to prove that their government had been right on the mark when it highlighted the terrorist threat back in 2003. In April 2004, terrorists (who had come from Iraq) struck at an abandoned UN building in the Mezzeh neighborhood, killing a policeman and a young schoolteacher. In July 2005, a group of terrorists were apprehended on Mount Qassioun overlooking the Syrian capital, after a shoot-out that caused panic among picnickers. Earlier that year, Syria announced that it had arrested one man and killed another who had been planning an attack in Damascus on behalf of Jund al-Sham, a militant Sunni organization believed to be directly linked to Syrian al-Qaeda member Abu Musaab al-

Souri, a former member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In November 2006, a suicide bomber struck at the Syrian-Lebanese border, blowing himself up before being arrested by Syrian police.

Apart from those incidents, a number of attacks apparently were thwarted by Syrian security: In an interview with the New York Times in 2005, President Bashar al-Assad acknowledged that authorities had apprehended a terrorist wanting to carry out an attack at the Palace of Justice. In June 2006, terrorists tried — and failed — to hijack the headquarters of Syrian National Television in the Umayyad Square right in heart of modern Damascus. Later in September, they tried to attack the US Embassy in Damascus, but were also apprehended by Syrian security.

Many in the Bush White House dismissed the seriousness of these attacks, claiming that when terrorists strike, they strike with precision, often killing tens or hundreds of civilians. Skeptics questioned the low casualty count – apparently, three dead were considered negligible - compared to the deadly score al-Qaeda achieved on 9-11, or in places like Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Bottom line, most observers who were close to the White House’s political line seemed to think that the Syrians were grossly inflating the security threat for tactical gains, or even that the attacks themselves were mere fabrications, staged to promote Syria’s current rulers as opponents of militant Islam, and as a bulwark against it.

Those more familiar with Syrian politics and its ruling elite since the early 1970ies argued otherwise: never, they said, would Syria gamble with its security reputation to pull off such a stunt with the Americans. Syria takes great pride in its national security — and gives it top priority — meaning that it would never doctor such horrifying attacks which might — if they were really fabricated —inspire real terrorists to jump into action.

The Abu Kamal Attack: Pursuing What?

Right on the heels of the latest attack, and the confusion surrounding it, came the dramatic

incident of October 26: Shortly after 4.30 PM, US choppers violated Syrian airspace near the border town of Abu Kamal, fired at a building under construction and killed eight civilians. Two US aircraft even landed and dispatched commandoes who shot at the dead bodies. Syria immediately cried foul and objected to the violation of its sovereignty, breaking the news to the international media as an unprecedented act of aggression by the United States. Adding insult to injury, a statement made by a military official in Washington claimed that the raid targeted a logistic network for foreign fighters in Iraq, working with al-Qaeda. US sources floated the name of a certain Abu Ghadiyah, a top commander close to the late Abu Musaab al-Zarkawi, the ex-leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Syria's lax cooperation on the border, the US official added, led the Americans "to take the matter into their own hands."

Yet, all of those killed in the village of Sukkariyya in Abu Kamal were Syrians, such as Dawoud Mohammad Abdullah, who died together with his four children, and even a staunch American ally like the French president Nicolas Sarkozy expressed "serious concern" about the raid and its casualties. Just as the French, many observers sensed something fishy in the American tale: For one, how is it that a "terrorist cell", armed men trained in military combat and brought to Syria from different parts of the world, if we were to believe the Americans, could be gunned down in broad daylight without firing back a single bullet?

Moreover, it appears rather strange for the US to strike at the one country in the region that has spearheaded combating Islamic fundamentalism since the mid-1960s. Syria cooperated with the United States after 9-11 to track down members of al-Qaeda, who had been members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. US officials claimed that by providing the FBI with information, Syria had helped "save American lives." Four years later, in September 2005 verdicts were handed down in Spain to 24 members of al-Qaeda, all involved in 9-11. The Syrian Imad Yarkas (42) was duly sentenced to 27 years in prison for providing logistic support to al-Qaeda and conspiracy to commit murder on September 11. But very unjustly, according to many observers, Syrian

journalist Tayseer Alouni of Al-Jazeera TV was sentenced to seven years for allegedly channeling money to Al-Qaeda, while the real reason seemed to have been an interview with Osama Bin Laden conducted shortly after the 9-11 attacks. Yarkas, on the other hand, was accused of having organized a meeting in Tarragona, Spain, in July 2001, attended by Mohammad Atta, the man who crashed one of the airplanes into New York's Twin Towers. Police found books about jihad and newspaper clippings about al-Qaeda at Yarkas's home. It was revealed that Yarkas had received a telephone call two weeks before September 11 from an accomplice called Farid Hilali, telling him in cryptic language, "We've entered the field of aviation and we have even cut the throat of the bird." German police concluded that this meant that the final stages of the terrorist attack were now underway. It was also believed that Yarkas helped set September 11 as the date for the attack. Other Syrians included in list of AL-Qaeda operatives were businessman Ma'mun al-Darkazanli and the deadly Abu Musaab al-Souri, believed to be the man behind the March 11, 2004 attacks in Madrid and possibly involved in the brutal July 7, 2004 attacks in London.

Faced with such reports, one is left to wonder how the Syrian position, voiced explicitly and repeatedly after September 11, whereby international terrorism was a threat and an enemy to Syria just as it was to US, could be dismissed as a bluff or even a fabrication. Syrian authorities have argued consistently that the roots for such types of Islamist terrorism lie in the Muslim Brotherhood, which Baathist Syria combated and crushed back in 1982. For the United States, on the other hand, those who were killed in Damascus on September 27 were apparently not enough evidence that Syria, from its own best interests, would not have hesitated to arrest Abu Ghadiyah or any other Jihadist operating on Syrian soil. Rather than sharing the intelligence, the choppers were sent in.

Islam(ism) in Syria: A Mixed Balance Sheet

In fact, there is a long tradition of Islamist radicalism and violence in Syria, starting with Marwan Hadid and other Muslim commanders who

led the combat against the Syrian regime from the 1960ies onwards. This generation was influenced by the veteran Muslim leaders of Syria who operated in the 1940s, mainly the founder of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Mustapha al-Sibaii. Unlike the newer generation of radicals, however, Sibaii was a gentleman politician and a civilized democrat. The second, much more violent generation included Abu Musaab al-Souri and Imad Yarkas, and was still influenced by men like Hadid. The third generation is that of young people, in their 20s and 30s, who were indoctrinated by the older men and who carried out attacks in the post-September 11 order, such as those in Bali in 2002, Istanbul in 2003, Madrid in March 2004 and London in July 2004. Their inspiration would be Jordanian the Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, who turned 40 shortly before being killed by the Americans in Iraq in 2006. These were the wolves who were lurking in Syrian society, and who showed up on the national TV screen, confessing to the Sidqi Miqdad bombing on September 27.

This is not to say that Syria did not have any moderate Islamic voices, combating — with little luck — the rising tide of Islamism in the Arab World. At the gates of the popular as-Sehour Mosque in Aleppo, a sign was placed shortly after 9-11 that read, "No to explosions!" showing a bomb with a red line going through it. This was a sign of Syria's willingness to cooperate, and of a moderate Islam that does not encourage terrorism. Further south in the capital Damascus, a regime-friendly moderate Muslim cleric named Mohammad Habash stood out as a member of the Syrian parliament, advocating moderate Islam. Syria continued to promote moderate Islam through regime-friendly clerics like Habash and the Aleppo-based preacher Mohammad Kamil al-Husayni. Through men like these, Syria hopes to curb the influence of other Islamic groups in Syria. One of the finest figures to emerge in Syria is Sheikh Ahmad Hassoun, the Grand Mufti of the Republic, who championed inter-faith dialogue between Islam and the West, after 9-11. When the US raids Syrian territory, allegedly in "hot pursuit" of terrorists, all it does is to silence the voice of moderate clerics such as these, and to empower fanatics like the ones who struck in the heart of

Damascus last September, along with those who take the pulpits in the Arab and Muslim world, chanting, "Death to America!".