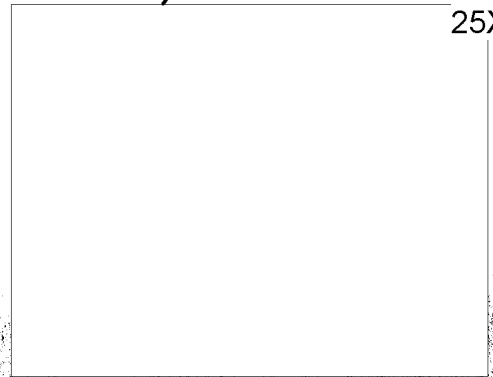




Director of
Central
Intelligence

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Syria's Role in International Terrorism

Interagency Intelligence Memorandum

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SYRIA'S ROLE IN
INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

Information available as of 21 November 1985 was
used in the preparation of this Memorandum.

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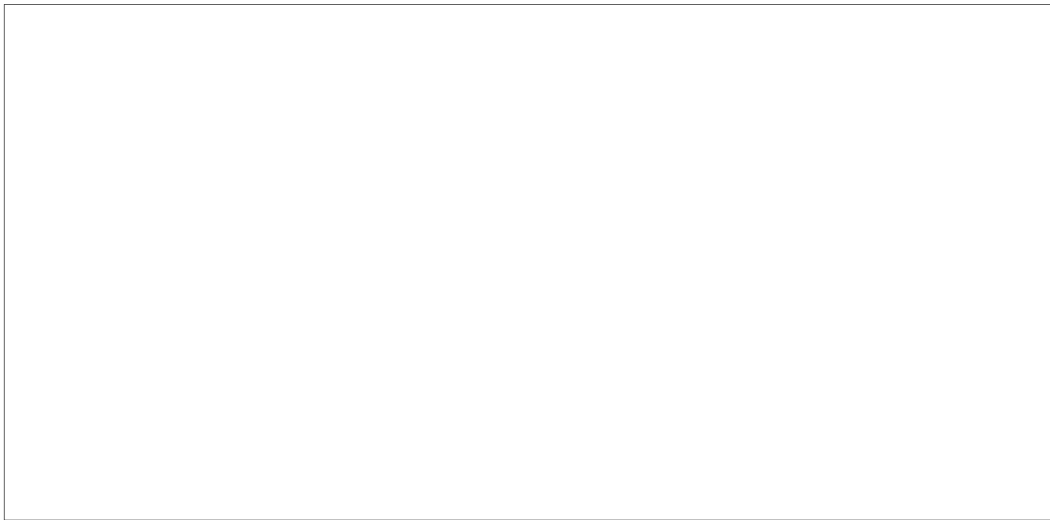
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SCOPE NOTE

This Memorandum addresses Syria's role as a practitioner and patron of international terrorism. It examines Syrian involvement in terrorist incidents—directly and through surrogates—and discusses the extent of Syrian assistance to terrorist groups in the Middle East and worldwide. It reviews the principal targets of Syrian-sponsored terrorist operations and assesses the likelihood of Syria's involvement in attacks on US personnel or installations.

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Syria is a major practitioner and patron of international terrorism. While direct involvement of Syrian personnel in terrorist operations has declined in the past several years, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of attacks carried out by groups operating with Syrian support. Since early 1983, these groups have been involved in at least 70 terrorist attacks on Jordanian, US, Palestinian, and Israeli targets. Groups receiving Syrian support have attacked US facilities 11 times in the past 30 months.

Syrian President Assad uses the threat of personal violence and other terrorist tactics to raise the cost to his opponents and recalcitrant "allies" of pursuing policies inimical to Syrian interests. For example, Syria's involvement in the assassination of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel in 1982 is widely suspected. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the deployment of the Multinational Force, and the 17 May Agreement prompted a sharp increase in terrorist activities by groups receiving Syrian support, including the radical Shias who attacked the US Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983. Syria has instigated terrorist operations against Jordanian officials and facilities and officials of the Palestine Liberation Organization in reaction to Jordanian efforts to build moderate Arab support for peace negotiations with Israel and to PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat's willingness to work with King Hussein. Increasing strains in Syria's relations with Iraq, the Persian Gulf states, Turkey, and others are also prompting similar terrorist responses.

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Damascus's increasing use of surrogates reflects an easing of the internal threat to the Syrian regime as well as Assad's desire to mask Syria's role. Surrogate Palestinians funded, trained, and armed by Syria include the militant Abu Nidal group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, the Fatah rebels, and Saiqa. These groups and others carry out terrorist operations at Syrian direction or with Syrian support. A key non-Palestinian group that receives Syrian support is the radical Lebanese Shia Hizballah. In the absence of the Multinational Forces in Lebanon, Syria is working to stabilize the security situation there and is pursuing a dual-track policy of imposing some constraints on Hizballah, while at the same time

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attempting to co-opt them into operations more in line with Syrian interests.

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Syria cooperates selectively with the other two major Middle Eastern sponsors of terrorism, Libya and Iran. The three states share a desire to undermine US policies in the Middle East, to "liberate" territory occupied by Israel, and to weaken pro-Western moderate Arab governments; however, available evidence does not indicate that they are pursuing a coordinated terrorist strategy. Divergent interests and longstanding rivalries among the three make temporary, tactical ties on a case-by-case basis the norm, rather than consolidated trilateral cooperation in terrorism.

The USSR and Syria have a common interest in blocking the Hussein-Arafat initiative. To the extent that support and training of specific radical groups advance that goal, Moscow and Damascus cooperate, although policy differences limit such cooperation. Moscow does not want Syria to gain control of the Palestinian movement and opposes Syrian terrorist acts directed at pro-Arafat Palestinians. Moscow's position could change if significant progress is made toward Jordanian-Palestinian-Israeli talks.

Syrian support for its surrogate groups in Jordan and Lebanon and for Shia groups in Lebanon has made Damascus a party to bombings of US facilities, but we do not know if Syrian officials explicitly approved the targets. We do not believe that Assad is intent on targeting US personnel and facilities directly, but we believe that he would take advantage of the anti-American militancy of the groups he supports to encourage attacks against the United States if it would serve Syrian interests. In this way, Assad will continue to try to impose high costs on the United States for pursuing policies he opposes and at the same time to use the leverage he gains over the groups that get Syrian support to persuade US policymakers that Damascus must be bargained with and Syrian interests must receive high consideration in Washington.

Unless effective political, economic, or military pressures can be brought to bear, Assad will believe he can continue to use terrorism selectively for the foreseeable future when such actions serve Syrian interests and Damascus is able to disguise its role. Political dialogue offers the United States some opportunity to influence Syrian policy. Damascus is receptive to high-level US delegations and demarches. Assad's makeup includes a strong desire to be perceived as a major player in the region, particularly with regard to the peace process. Mere consultations, however, will not result in Syria's acquiescence in policies it diametrically opposes.

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Although Syria has certain economic vulnerabilities, in our judgment economic pressure is unlikely to diminish Syrian support for international terrorism.

Selective US retaliatory strikes against Syria would run the risk of prompting Syrian-directed terrorist attacks against US facilities and personnel without deterring continued terrorist activity by Damascus. More extensive US military pressure, particularly the threat of military intervention during a crisis situation such as the TWA hijacking, or bombing of Syrian oil refineries or military facilities such as the country's air defense system, could prove to be a major deterrent. Such actions would clearly run the risk of prompting a Soviet military reaction and could stiffen Syrian resolve.

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