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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE SPONSORED
TERRORISM AND FAILED STATES:
A CASE STUDY OF SYRIA

by

JACOB SMITH

Presented to the Faculty of the Honors College of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE SPONSORED TERRORISM AND FAILED STATES: A CASE STUDY OF SYRIA

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2016

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Terrorism is not a new phenomenon, but over the past ten years it has taken a dangerous turn. Terrorist groups have become more powerful than ever before, appropriating enough resources to gain regional influence on a scale traditionally only seen by states. This can be largely attributed to the failing of traditional governments to maintain control of their territory and people. The resulting chaos creates an environment in which terrorists thrive. My research focused on Syria and its fall to determine whether the terrorist practices tolerated or endorsed by the al-Assad regime are to blame. Historical terrorist actions linked to the al-Assad regime were analyzed to see how they affected attitudes, and recent events in the Syrian Civil War were studied. My research lends support to the conclusion that the violence utilized by the al-Assad regime as a means to an end ultimately

created a culture of terror that undermined the government and allowed the country to descend into its current state of chaos.

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CHAPTER 1

SYRIA'S TERRORISTIC HISTORY

1.1 Introduction

Syria's modern history of terrorist activity can be traced to the rise of the al-Assad regime in 1970. To understand the conflict that lies at the center of Syria, an understanding of the sectarian nature of the country is required. While the country is 87% Islamic, there are several different sects, most notably, the Sunnis, who make up 74% of the population, and the Alawi, which make up less than 13% (CIA World Fact Book). These sects vied for political power even before Syria became a state. The civil war that we see in Syria today is a resurgence of the struggle that had been on hold ever since Hafez al-Assad rose to power and quelled opposition in the early 1980s.

The fact that al-Assad gained power to begin with is something of a fluke of history. Al-Assad, along with the majority of his regime, is Alawi Muslim, a small sect of the Shia branch. He took over the country through a military coup in November 1970 enabled by the fact that the Syrian military contained unrepresentatively high proportions of Alawi Muslims in the officer corps (Pipes 173). Since that coup, he remained in power by ruthlessly putting down the rebellions that followed with what can be considered acts of state-sponsored terrorism.

1.2 Hama Massacre

The most iconic instance of terrorism sponsored by the al-Assad regime occurred on February 2, 1982. The Muslim Brotherhood had been murdering Alawite leaders in

opposition to al-Assad's secular rule. In response, Hafez al-Assad essentially leveled an entire city.

The city of Hama was a center for the Sunni-based Muslim Brotherhood resistance, thought to house between 200 and 500 militants (Atassi). To deal with the insurgents and prevent further challenges to his regime, al-Assad used overwhelming force. Jet fighters were called in and artillery used to collapse buildings so that tanks could accompany ground forces as they marched to seize the city. Due to the nature of the operation, there is no accurate death toll, but estimates are between 10,000 and 30,000 people were killed in the 27-day military campaign that ensued (Atassi). About a third of the historic inner city was transformed into rubble (Holliday 12).

Such massive loss of life cannot be chalked up to a loss of control of Syrian troops, but rather was the direct and intended effect of the regime. The slaughter of a population is not an easy thing to carry out, and so al-Assad made sure that the troops given this mission would not falter. The majority of the Syrian Army's enlisted men, although very under representative of the 87% Sunni civilian population, was still Sunni. The Muslim Brotherhood believed that if they faced the Syrian Army in open conflict, the sectarian ties between the Sunni majority army regulars and the Brotherhood would cause them to revolt against their predominately Alawite officers and defect to their cause (van Dam 98). Anticipating this, the al-Assad regime deployed only the soldiers most loyal to him, under Alawite command. In fact, many of the commanders that participated in suppressing the uprising were al-Assad family. Two brigades were dispatched to Hama, the 3rd Armored Division, and the 21st Mechanized Brigades. Seventy-five percent of the officers and thirty-three percent of the soldiers in these brigades were Alawite, not representative of the Syrian

Sunni majority population, or even the Army (van Dam 114). Furthermore, the regime took the precaution of removing any men in these brigades who were originally from Hama (Holliday 11).

Thus prepared, regime forces systematically cleared the city house by house. Any person suspected of being a Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer, mainly males of fighting age, was put to death or imprisoned. Many taken were never heard from again (Defense Intelligence Agency).

This is considered a terrorist event because the violence that was carried out served a larger purpose than to simply put down a rebellion. In dealing such a crushing blow, Hafez al-Assad restored what Syrian expert Joshua Landis refers to as his *zaama*, or “aura of invincibility” (Landis). Syria retains more patriarchal aspects in its society than most cultures today. Al-Assad’s strength as a leader was put into question by the rebellion. Thus it was al-Assad’s goal to not only end the immediate threat presented by the city of Hama, but to show that defiance would be severely punished. With this in mind, al-Assad even allowed some foreign journalists to enter the destroyed parts of the city days after the massacre happened (Lesch 45). Their accounts helped to spread the fear that al-Assad wished to instill in anyone who would challenge his regime. This tactic was so effective that the Muslim Brotherhood was all but absent from Syria for the next thirty years (Sadiki).

The massacre had a profound effect on the people of Syria. For nearly thirty years after it happened, it was not a subject that could be talked about openly. Many family members of the deceased were forced to make statements saying that it was not the regime that killed their relatives, but the Muslim Brotherhood (Atassi). Only since the more recent rebellion in Syria have the events of February 1982 been brought to light. It was from the

Omar Bin Khattab Mosque, the same mosque that sheltered women and children during the 1982 campaign, that the first protest in Hama appeared in 2011 (Atassi). The phrase “Oh Hama, forgive us” has become a rallying cry for the rebellion.

1.3 Hezbollah Relations

Aside from the human rights violations committed against its own people, the al-Assad regime has a history of international terrorism. Syria has been designated a “State Sponsor of Terror” by the United States since 1979 (Bureau of Counterterrorism). This is primarily due to the political and material support that it has provided foreign terrorist groups, chief among them Hezbollah. Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah collectively make up what is referred to as the Axis of Resistance (Sullivan). All three share a common Shia faith in a region of the world where Sunni Islam is the norm.

Hezbollah was founded in 1985 by Shia clerics with the purpose of forcing the state of Israel out of the territory it occupied in southern Lebanon (Daher). Since its success in ousting Israel however, rather than disband, it has only grown in strength and is today considered more powerful than the regular Lebanese Army (Daher). Despite its status as a foreign terrorist organization, Hezbollah has enjoyed support both monetarily and politically from Iran and Syria since its inception (Bureau of Counter Terrorism).

In 2000 there was a brief hope that Syria could start on a new path of domestic reform and improved international relations. The death of Hafez al-Assad on June 10, 2000 provided an opportunity for change. Hafez al-Assad was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, in a July 2000 referendum in which he received 97% of the vote (Black). Although he initially promised wide reforms such as freedom of the press and the tolerance of democratic lobbying groups, these ideas were short lived. Between a continuation of Hafez

al-Assad's hardline international policy against Israel, and the revoking of the civil liberties briefly granted after his induction to office, by 2001 it was clear that Bashar al-Assad's regime would be a continuation of his father's (Fattah).

There are many incidents of Hezbollah terrorist activity that point to Syrian involvement. Most well-known among them is Syria's alleged hand in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005. Hariri's motorcade was blown up as it drove through Beirut, killing him along with 21 others (Chulov & Shaheen). This came soon after Bashar al-Assad had allegedly threatened Hariri's life if he did not help pass an amendment that would keep the Syrian-friendly president of Lebanon in office for another term (Bergman).

Whether Bashar al-Assad actually had a hand in directing the operation has never been definitively determined. Regardless of the validity of the accusation however, the timing of the event, along with the political affiliation that the al-Assad regime has with Hezbollah, was enough to alter attitudes towards the regime. The result was an international outcry against the Syrian government. Faced with overwhelming international pressure, al-Assad was forced to end the three-decade long Syrian occupation of Lebanon. On May 23, just over three months from Hariri's death, U.N. Secretary General Annan confirmed "a United Nations mission has verified that Syrian troops and security forces have fully withdrawn from Lebanon" (Rabil 177).

Perhaps more importantly, the assassination deepened the rift between the Sunni people that counted Hariri among their own, and the Shia-backed Hezbollah. It served as another chapter in the Sunni narrative of being marginalized to the benefit of Shias (Chulov

& Shaheen). The Sunni population both in Lebanon and Syria viewed the event as one of their leaders assassinated in a play for continued Syrian domination.

CHAPTER 2

SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

2.1 International Support

The anti-regime sentiments that had been stewing over decades of al-Assad leadership finally reached a boiling point in March 2011. Teenagers in the city of Deraa were arrested by secret police for writing anti-government graffiti on buildings. Inspired by the Arab Spring movement that had seen the removal of unpopular presidents in Egypt and Tunisia, the parents of the children protested. The protests were met with deadly force when security forces fired live ammunition into the crowd (Rodgers, Grutteb, Offer, & Asare). Rather than settle the matter however, this sparked a larger nationwide call for reform. By the following week, anti-regime demonstrations were taking place all across Syria. While they started peacefully, continued crackdowns by security forces using deadly force drove protesters to arm themselves. By the end of the summer, civil war had broken out in Syria (Gilsinan).

While it was the people of Syria who began the protests that led to conflict, the rebellion would have been short-lived and one-sided without intervention from outside forces. The behavior of the al-Assad regime previously outlined is completely unacceptable to Western sensibilities. Although it was the people of Syria who initially started the rebellion, Western countries were quick to react and provide political and material support to rebels. Saudi Arabia was one of the first to come to their fellow Sunnis' aid by providing weapons. As early as 2012 the Sunni kingdom was reported to have brought up a large

shipment of rifles and machine guns from a Croatian stockpile and arranged for them to be shipped into Syria through Jordan. The United States was much slower to respond to the rebels' plea for weapons (Londono & Miller). They did, however, provide other "non-lethal support" such as food, medicine, and training to select rebel leaders through a CIA operation coded "Timber Sycamore" (Mazzetti & Apuzzo). As the war went on however, the Obama administration eventually revisited that decision and the CIA operation was expanded to a \$250 million effort to support moderate opposition to the al-Assad regime (Londono & Miller). By the end of 2013 the United States was providing weapons and training to rebels out of a base in Jordan in a joint venture with Saudi Arabia.

2.2 Private Donors and Informal Banking

Apart from aid offered by nations, there was a large influx of aid given by individual contributors and non-government organizations (NGOs), primarily located in the Gulf regions. By the beginning of 2014 these donations were estimated to have reached into the hundreds of millions of dollars (Dickinson).

These monetary donations would typically be limited in a region as war torn as Syria today. To circumvent this impediment to transferring funds, donors and humanitarian aid agencies utilized a solution unique to Syria and the Middle East in general. *Hawalas* are informal banking institutions that are commonly operated in the Middle East. They work on a network of mutual trust between *hawaladars*, the lenders (Dean).

A person wishing to transfer funds presents his money to a local *hawala* and tells the operator where he would like the funds transferred. The *hawaladar* then makes arrangements with a partner operating a *hawala* in the area to which the funds are to be sent, and gives the client a password, typically numerical. The client then relays the

password to the person receiving the funds. The receiver visits his local *hawala* to pick up the money sent to him, minus a service fee, typically around 4%. In this way value can be instantly transferred across state lines without any physical movement. The hawaladars keep track of the deficits owed between them and their associates and will typically arrange cash couriers to take the difference to the proper location and balance the books when needed (Dickinson).

In Syria, this system has proven particularly effective. Even before the start of the civil war, distrust in the government and a desire to avoid regulation created a network of unlicensed *hawalas* across the country (Dean). After the conflict started in 2011, this network became an invaluable tool for moving money. Rebel military forces use it to receive monetary backing from supporters outside of the country. More recently since 2014 *hawalas* have been more fully utilized by NGOs to distribute humanitarian aid to areas of the country that are difficult to access. As the conflict continues, it is likely that these networks will continue to grow to accommodate the increased strain placed on them by international backers.

CHAPTER 3

ENTRANCE OF ISIL

The aftermath of a prolonged civil war has transformed Syria into a failed state that cannot control large portions of its own territory. In this climate of utter turmoil, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has stepped in to fill the power vacuum. Originally started in Iraq as a subsidiary of al-Qaida, the Sunni Jihadist movement became extremely violent even relative to other terrorist groups. When the opportunity to seize land in Syria developed as a result of the conflict, ISIL was quick to move into the region and expand its caliphate. This land grab was swift and efficient, primarily due to the handoff of the power from the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaida affiliated group that had gained renown for their fighting prowess against the al-Assad regime. A large portion of al-Nusra entered into the ISIL fold, which soon revealed its own agenda. No longer was the focus of their mission on expelling the al-Assad regime from Syria, but on establishing themselves as the regional power where a caliphate could be established. Towards this end, ISIL began to declare war on its former associates in the Free Syrian Army, and became a new player all its own in the conflict. The popularity of their hard-core Sunni Islamic stance, combined with the strength and stability they convey, has made ISIL popular with jihadists across the world, calling thousands of foreign fighters to their cause (Ignatius).

Traditionally, one of the safeguards against terrorism is the terrorists' lack of territory from which to operate. With no functioning government in place, Syria now

presents an ideal location for a terrorist base. Located in the heart of the Middle East, it presents both the room for terrorists to train without fear of government interference, as well as easy access through the porous borders of Lebanon and Turkey (Ignatius). Aggravating the situation is the fact that in this environment of instability and chaos, ISIL is finding fertile recruiting grounds. People who would not normally consider such radical ideologies are more likely to buy into them when faced with constant threats to personal safety (Bender).

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The al-Assad regime began utilizing terrorism as a means of furthering its political power over Syria. These practices, however, effectively lost the support and trust of the Syrian people. The sectarian rifts created in the country by events such as the Hama Massacre and the Hariri assassination have proved too deep to heal to date. While the show of force in 1982 bought the regime almost three decades of relative peace, the population remained a powder keg primed to explode into rebellion. Developments during that time, such as the creation of an illegal informal banking system relying on *hawalas*, served to accommodate the eventual call to arms. That call came as a spark provided by the Arab Spring movement across the Middle East.

The regional and international powers that intervened to steer events only escalated the war and led to wide spread resentment from the forces they were attempting to aid. This in turn created a climate in which neither party was or is able to claim a decisive victory. The stagnation and lack of control opened the door to ISIL, which neither the Syrian rebel groups nor Western powers have been able to effectively seal shut.

In the case of Syria, sponsoring terrorism initiated a series of events that have culminated in turning the region into one of the greatest global security threats today. It is impossible to say whether this could have been avoided had world powers stepped in at the beginning to curb al-Assad's terrorist policies, or if they had stayed out of Syrian affairs

completely. What this study of Syria does support is that no matter the reason, regimes ought to avoid policies that alienate them from their populations.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Jacob Smith is a liberal arts major earning an Honors degree in Political Science with a minor in Criminal Justice. His areas of interest include globalization and international terrorism. His work at UT Arlington includes researching how globalization has affected terrorism and determining proper policy responses to international terrorist events. In following these interests, Jacob spent a semester abroad in Barcelona, Spain, where he completed internationally focused course work in political science at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Upon graduation, Jacob will attend the University of Texas School of Law.