

# US uses Israel as its proxy to threaten Syria

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7 October 2004

Israel's assassination of Izz el-Deen al-Sheikh Khalil, a senior Hamas leader in the Syrian capital of Damascus, is a criminal act. It provides damning confirmation that if any country merits the title of a "rogue state" that operates like some gangster mob across international borders, it is Israel.

More importantly, when not a single American, European or even an Arab government spokesperson utters a word of condemnation then there can be only one explanation. Israel not only has the full backing of the United States, but it is in fact acting as Washington's proxy in the region. The Bush administration is using Israel as its subcontractor to threaten Syria and Iran, carry out military strikes and reorganise the region in its interests.

This is why—shielded by its backers in the White House—Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud government is able to operate with impunity. And what is more, world leaders know it.

Sharon was one of the first and most avid advocates in the Begin cabinet of Israel's 1981 air strike on Iraq's Osirak nuclear plant. His government has repeatedly warned that it may sooner or later take direct action to stop an Iranian nuclear bomb "going critical."

Far from restraining Sharon, the US has just agreed to supply Israel with 500 so-called "bunker busters" that could be used against Iran or possibly Syria—as Israeli security experts admit. These precision bombs, each weighing a ton, can penetrate deep underground and pierce concrete walls up to two metres thick. So unlike the 1981 attack that took place behind President Ronald Reagan's back, a similar action against Iran would be Made in the USA.

Khalil was killed on Sunday September 26 when his booby-trapped car exploded after he turned the ignition. Israel's Channel Two television said that Israel was responsible and government sources gave the same message to Associated Press. Showing its complete contempt for international law and public opinion, Sharon's government made no official statement admitting or denying responsibility.

The Israeli minister for public security, Gideon Ezra, denied any knowledge of the assassination but welcomed it. "I am glad," he said. The assassination in the heart of a foreign capital was clearly meant as a signal that Israel would attack any country accused of harbouring groups that mounted actions against it.

Khalil, a Palestinian resident of Gaza, was expelled from Israel and the occupied territories in 1992. After initially seeking refuge in Lebanon, he moved to Damascus, where Hamas has an office. The *Guardian* newspaper reported that Palestinian sources said that Khalil was believed to be in charge of Hamas's military wing outside the Occupied Territories, but the Syrian Interior ministry denied that he had carried out any military activities on Syrian soil.

Hamas's representative in Lebanon, Osama Hamadan, believed that the assassination had been carried out with the help of an Arab country. Khalil's assassination came two days after the London based *Al-Hayat* newspaper reported that Arab sources had stated that an unnamed Arab state had provided information about the Hamas leaders to Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency. This was in response to a formal request from Mossad, which wanted the information to help it plan assassinations.

An Israeli attack on Syria had been on the cards for several weeks. Following a double suicide attack on two buses that killed 16 people in Beer Sheba at the end of August, for which a Hamas cell based in Hebron admitted responsibility, Israel immediately claimed that Syria was behind the suicide bombings and threatened military action, saying that:

\* Hamas used its Damascus office to mount military attacks against Israel,

\* Syria, Iran, the Syrian-backed Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, Hamas and other Palestinian groups used Damascus as a base to plan and organise attacks against Israel,

\* Syria serves as a conduit for Iranian weapons that are eventually smuggled into Gaza from Egypt, and

\* The military wing of Hezbollah, Syria's proxy in Lebanon, was behind several recent Palestinian attacks.

Sharon said that Syria was directly responsible for Hamas attacks because the orders to carry them out were issued from Damascus. He produced not a shred of evidence to support these claims.

Israeli Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon threatened that Israel "would deal with... those who support terrorism," including those in "terror command posts in Damascus."

Israel has for some time been seeking an excuse for a confrontation with Syria. Sharon's Greater Israel project demands, as well as the land grab on the West Bank and the penning of the Palestinians into ghettos—or better still their transfer elsewhere, that Israel control the headwaters of the river Jordan which lie in Syria and Lebanon.

Last October, Israel bombed Syria, supposedly in retaliation for a suicide bombing in Haifa. In October 2002, Israel threatened an attack on Lebanon—and by implication Syria—if it went ahead with plans to divert and increase its abstractions from the Wazzani and Hasbani rivers, the headwaters of the Jordan river. On that occasion, the US rushed in to stop the dispute from escalating.

This time, however, Washington immediately signalled its approval for Sharon to step up hostilities against Syria, with State Department official Richard Boucher saying that terrorist groups such as Hamas had to be put out of business.

These threats against Syria are part of a broader agenda outlined in a policy document published in 1996 by the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies for the incoming Likud government of Binyamin Netanyahu in Israel, conceived to be in both Israel and America's interests. The document was authored by prominent neo-conservatives Douglas Feith, a member of the Bush administration, and Richard Perle, a former member of the Bush administration, until he was forced to resign.

It called for a "clean break" with the "land for peace" strategy of the previous Labour government, "weakening, containing and even rolling back Syria," a more aggressive stance towards Israel's Arab neighbours, including "removing Saddam Hussein from power" and a "redrawing of the map of the Middle East that would threaten Syria's territorial integrity."

The neo-conservatives used the September 11 attacks on New York to push ahead with their plans. The "Project for a New American Century" wrote an open letter to Bush targeting Iraq, Syria and Iran as sponsors of

terrorism. The group called on the US president to demand that Syria and Iran immediately cease all assistance to the Hezbollah militia, urging that "Should Iran and Syria refuse to comply, the administration should consider appropriate measures of retaliation."

The Bush administration has repeatedly issued bellicose threats against Syria, warning this small and impoverished country on whose borders lie the US-occupied Iraq and the warmongering US ally, Israel, that if it does not bow to US demands that it will face the same fate as Iraq. It has branded Syria a "rogue state."

In April 2002, contingency plans for the US to invade Syria that were drawn up in response to a demand from Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were leaked.

Since then the US, without producing a shred of evidence, has accused Syria of providing aid to Iraq in the run up to the war, developing and testing chemical weapons, and developing "an offensive biological weapons capability." It has demanded that Damascus end its support for anti-Israel groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, stop anti-US militants crossing the Syria's 600 kilometre-long and mainly desert border with Iraq, stop providing a safe haven for Iraqis fleeing the US, and withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

In December 2003, President Bush ratified the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, which bans trade with Syria. Last May, Bush announced a series of tough sanctions against Syria, claiming that Syria constituted "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and the economy of the United States."

In September, the Lebanese parliament voted to amend its constitution to allow President Emile Lahoud, a Syrian stooge, to remain in office for another three years after the end of his official six-year term.

Syria has in effect run Lebanon, once part of the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire, ever since the end of the 15-year-long civil war in Lebanon. This political arrangement was sanctioned by the Taif Accords, which allowed Syria to keep 17,000 troops in Lebanon as a reward for supporting the US in the 1991 Gulf War.

In the context of ever-widening social inequality that has seen the country run by billionaires, Hezbollah, an Islamic party with seats in the Lebanese parliament that also has a militia, has grown at the expense of Amal, a Syria-backed Shia party. Widely seen as less corrupt than its rival parties and credited with expelling Israel from South Lebanon, its support has been boosted by its extensive welfare network upon which the poorest layers depend. Earlier this year, Hezbollah led one of the largest-ever demonstrations in Beirut against the US attacks on Iraq's Shiite cities of Najaf and Karbala.

But Syria's usefulness to Washington, like others before it, has long since passed. Now, when the Taif agreement cuts across US interests in the region, the Bush administration has taken the unprecedented and provocative step of interfering with Lebanon's internal affairs. With France, it rushed a resolution through the United Nations Security Council condemning outside interference in the Lebanese elections and calling for the withdrawal of all troops from the country.

While the initial draft had called for "additional measures" to be taken if foreign—meaning Syrian—troops were not withdrawn and all militia—meaning Hezbollah and other Islamic groups—were not dismantled, the resolution called for UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to report back to the Security Council on its implementation.

Annan's report has implicitly acknowledged the resolution's flagrant interference with national sovereignty. He says that both governments agree that Syrian troops are in Lebanon at the request of the Lebanese government. Syria has justified the presence of its troops in Lebanon in the absence of a peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel, which did so much to foment and prolong the civil war—invading, bombing and occupying the country for 20 years.

Syria's response to the increasingly belligerent and menacing US stance

has been tempered as ever by its need to carry out a delicate balancing act. Facing mounting opposition to both the US war and occupation of Iraq and the deteriorating social conditions at home, particularly among its large Kurdish minority, the Syrian government has made some public criticisms of the US and Israel for domestic consumption.

On the international arena, it has attempted to play off the European Union, its major trading partner, and other Middle East states, including Iran, against the Americans. But in the final analysis, it is desperate to reach some accommodation with Washington to head off a direct confrontation and prevent the EU following the US lead, in order to defend its own interests in the region.

Syria has therefore done everything it could to appease Washington. As a member of the UN Security Council, Syria voted for the notorious November 2002 resolution that imposed a harsh new weapons inspection regime on Iraq and created the pretext for the US-led invasion. Although it absented itself from the UN vote in 2003 legitimising the US occupation, Damascus later issued a statement supporting the resolution.

It has fed US officials with useful intelligence for its "war on terror." It has repeatedly made attempts to restart peace talks with Israel aimed at securing the return of the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in the 1967 war, and putting an end to the possibility of renewed hostilities between the two countries. But Sharon has refused to talk to the Syrians.

Instead Israel's threat of military action and its assassination of Khalil in Damascus have served to escalate the pressure on Syria.

Last month, the Syrian government announced that it had closed down the Damascus offices of Hamas and other Palestinian groups, although it denied that they were used to plan attacks on Israel. Just last week, an Islamist militant, Ismail Khatib, was arrested in Beirut with ten others, charged with planning terrorist attacks and recruiting fighters to oppose the US occupation of Iraq. Khatib died in police custody, supposedly of a "heart attack," prompting angry demonstrations. Khatib's death at the hands of the Lebanese police was widely interpreted as being the result of Syrian determination to be seen to be acceding to Washington's demands.

Furthermore, after two days of talks in Damascus between Syrian and Iraqi officials and US military commanders, the US says Syria has agreed to tighten its border with Iraq to prevent militants from crossing the border.

"A number of understandings have come out of this meeting with respects to commitment with the Iraqi interim government and the coalition and the Syrians to stop illicit activity across the border," US Secretary of State Colin Powell said in an interview with the AFP news agency. "I think it is a positive step, but what really matters is action and not just an agreement," Powell said.

It is unlikely that any of this will satisfy the US.

The most right wing sections of the Republican party are pushing hard for all out war against Damascus, despite the destabilising impact it would have on the whole of the region. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that they not only welcome the destabilisation of the Middle East, but are actively working towards this end. For such layers, any hesitation is a sign of weakness to be compared with the failure of Bush senior to use the opportunity posed by the 1991 Gulf War to topple Saddam Hussein.

The "global war against terrorism" has its own inexorable logic. Having plunged into war in the vain hope of resolving the deepening economic crisis at home by securing Iraq's oil resources and deflecting the mounting discontent over deepening poverty and social inequality, the Bush administration has no alternative but to carry out further crimes. It must press ahead with other military adventures in a desperate attempt to maintain itself in office. That is why it has decided to encourage Sharon to provoke hostilities and possibly even war with either Syria or Iran.



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