

# Selective anti-terrorism

An archeologist I once knew was digging in Syria shortly after World War II. He unearthed a rock near Damascus upon which some forgotten soldier of Rome's XIIIth Legion had scratched, "Syrians are horrid people." Clearly, the view of Syria has not changed very much in 2,000 years.

This past week a British court found a small-time terrorist — and by implication the Syrian government — guilty of attempting to blow up an Israeli airliner. In spite of Syrian denials, and the remote possibility that Syria may have been framed by one of its many enemies, it looked like Damascus had finally been caught holding a smoking gun.

Not surprisingly, western governments and the media, never fond of Syria to begin with, lambasted the regime of Hafez Assad. Britain broke off diplomatic relations; the U.S. and Canada withdrew their ambassadors. Other NATO members adopted a wait-and-see attitude, once more angering their Anglo-Saxon partners.

Syria, of course, deserves condemnation and severe punishment. Its murderous intelligence agents and their political masters must indeed be scared into minimally acceptable behavior. Just about everyone agrees on this point. What strikes me as curious, however, is the West's persistent selectivity toward Syrian and other Mideastern terrorism.

Damascus has been dispensing terror for many years. Interestingly, the prime target of Syrian terrorism has been the Palestinians. The Syrian army has killed thousands of Palestinians in Lebanon; agents of Syria's many intelligence agencies have murdered hundreds more. Hafez Assad determined to get control of the Palestinian movement — and was ready to kill any of its members who dared oppose Syrian ambitions. Just this month, Syrian agents gunned down a senior PLO official in Athens.

Western governments and media, now so outraged about Syrian terrorism, hardly noticed Syria's terror attacks against Palestinians. When Syria reportedly killed some 15,000 of its own citizens during a fundamentalist rising in the city of Hama, western reaction was a shrug. Even less interest was shown by the West to the more than 1,000 Syrians killed over the past two years by anti-Assad Muslim Brotherhood terrorists — not even when Jordan, an American protectorate, admitted arming and training them.

When evidence surfaced that Washington was backing attempts to assassinate Libya's Moammar Khadafy and funding car bombers in Lebanon, the western media yawned.

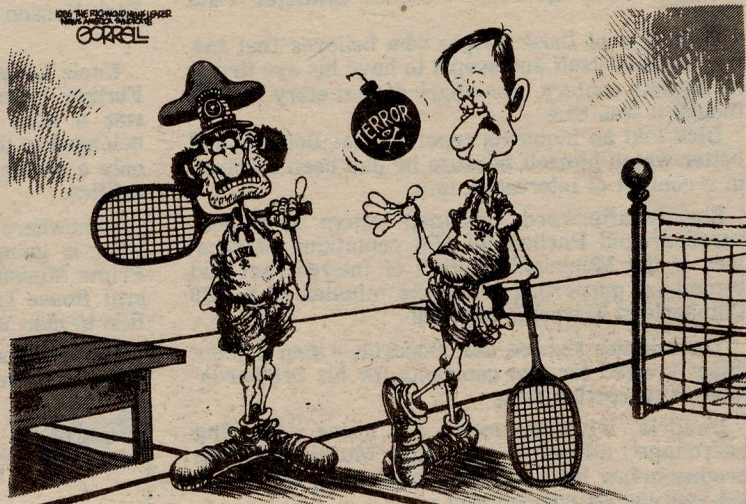
When Israel shot down a Libyan airliner, the event was described as an 'unfortunate accident.' The 10,000-odd civilians killed by Israel during its 1982 invasion of Lebanon were "unfortunate victims."

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When Israel hijacked a Syrian airliner, the event that triggered Syria's attempt to blow up the El Al flight, western writers said that it was all part of the holy war against terrorism.

Iraq, according to Washington, used to be a "terrorist nation." That is, until Washington felt it was expedient for U.S. interests to back Baghdad in its war against Iran. Suddenly, terrorist Iraq, home of the father of terror, Abu Nidal, became a "non-terrorist" nation and the recipient of U.S. aid. Today, Iraq's agents continue to murder peo-



"DOUBLES, ANYONE? ..."

ple in the Mideast but the U.S. turns a blind eye.

Fighting against terrorism may be noble, as many western conservatives suggest, but doing so selectively saps the moral basis of this crusade. Washington's ululations over Syrian terrorism would have more ethical value if the CIA had not been busy aiding Jordanian-based terrorists used to attack Syria.

Even more depressingly, Syria's Assad will likely come out of this latest imbroglio largely unscathed. Bashing Syria too hard means pushing it into the hands of the waiting Soviets. Bringing down the Damascus regime could end up provoking a general war between Syria and Israel. Even getting too tough with Assad could mean death for French and American hostages held in Lebanon.

Crafty President Hafez Assad is the man everyone hates — but also the one everyone needs to keep Syria stable and the region calm. So, while hollering loudly, the U.S. and Israel will continue to deal with him on the sly. In the Mideast, moral outrage won't even buy you a cup of coffee.