

# ATTACKS ON US EMBASSY IN DAMASCUS, 12 SEPTEMBER 2006

15 September 2006

An ambitious terrorist attack on the US Embassy in Damascus has drawn attention to a group called *Jund al Sham*. Less known in the West, *Jund al Sham* has been blamed by the Syrian government for a number of attacks in Syria in recent years. The organisation's links to al Qaeda remain unclear. However, Syrian President Bashar al Assad will be hoping the incident offers him an opportunity to prove to the US that Damascus is also under threat from Salafist extremists. Yet, it remains to be seen whether Syria will effectively capitalise on this attack to demonstrate its credentials in combating Salafist terrorism and end its political isolation, or whether Islamists extremists will be able to widen the schism between state and society in Syria.

## Details of the Attack

On Tuesday 12th September the US Embassy compound in the Ain Roumeineh district of Damascus came under attack by terrorists. This incident is highest profile of a string of attacks in Syria, most of which have been unsuccessful, and which point to ongoing levels of dissent and violence between Syria's Islamist community and the state.

Details emerging about the attack have been fogged by a number of contradictory reports. However, there are strong indications that the assault team comprised at least four men armed with assault rifles, hand-grenades, and at least one vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED).

According to witness reports, three men got out of a car that had pulled up beside the rear gate of the compound at around 1000 hours and shouted "Allah-u Akbar" as they opened fire at the Syrian security guards and attempted to throw grenades over the compound walls. In an apparently simultaneous VBIED attack, a fourth man driving a small van crashed into the front gate of the embassy but the explosives failed to detonate. The man fled the van and was shot and wounded. After the attack the van was found to contain pipe bombs strapped to propane gas canisters. Reports also suggest that a second VBIED, or possibly a man wearing a suicide-bomb vest, may have detonated: news images show what appears to be a burnt-out car near the rear gates. Body parts were also discovered at the scene, suggesting that a detonation had occurred.

The SARA official news agency claims that one of Syria's anti-terrorism security troops was killed and at least eleven others were injured in a fifteen- to thirty-minute gun battle with the

attackers. Three of the attackers were killed during the assault and the fourth was arrested. However, this injured man died the following day in hospital. There have been further conflicting claims: first that the man was cooperating with security services, and then another that he would have been unable to co-operate due to the severity of his injuries.

Despite the inconsistencies in reporting, largely compounded by the Syrian authorities' common practice of releasing inaccurate and obfuscating information, it is clear that the attackers failed to make it past the high walls surrounding the compound. The response by the Syrian security forces and US marines guarding the compound was swift and effective. Furthermore, no Americans were hurt (although a passing Chinese diplomat was).



Ultimately the attack, against what is a notably hard target, was a failure.

## Who was Responsible?

There has, to date, been no claim of responsibility for the assault: investigations are underway. However, the Syrian Ambassador to the United States has stated he believes the attack to have been carried out by Syrian nationals,

allegedly members of a Sunni Salafist group known as *Jund al-Sham*, or “the Greater Syrian Army”.

*Jund al Sham* has been blamed by Damascus for several attacks in Syria in recent years. It has been designated by the Syrian regime as the most active terrorist group in the country. Furthermore, the government has asserted that the group has links to *al Qaeda* (AQ). Indeed, Damascus, accused by the United States of supporting terrorism in its backing of Hezbollah and Palestinian militant organisations, argues that *Jund al Sham* demonstrates that it too, is targeted by Islamist terrorism. In June, President Bashar al Assad claimed that AQ-linked militants were taking refuge in Lebanon. The political motive for this claim is undoubtedly related to Syria’s forced withdrawal from Lebanon, and Assad’s comments may be seen to be a veiled attempt to mollify the US government and help end Damascus’ political isolation. Sunni Salafist terrorism poses a threat to Syria and the secular Ba’athist government, and Syria’s relative isolation renders it far more vulnerable to a popular Islamist takeover than the Bush Administration appears to believe, or would be willing to risk.

### Recent Terrorist Activity in Syria

There have been a number of attacks ascribed to Sunni Salafist militants, and more specifically *Jund al Sham*, in Syria over the past two years:

On 9 June 2006, Syrian authorities claimed to have disrupted an attack by radical Syrian Islamists near Ummayyad Square in Damascus, possibly targeting government buildings. In this incident, a team of ten armed militants reportedly opened fire against a police patrol in the early morning after being spotted in an abandoned building close to the state-run General Organisation of Radio and Television headquarters. A number of other key government buildings nearby including the Ministry of Defence and the Criminal Security Department. The ensuing battle lasted for more than three hours. Four militants were killed, as well as a Syrian security official and a guard at Syrian Television. The remaining six attackers were arrested.

In March 2006, two alleged members of *Jund*

*al Sham* were killed in clashes with Syrian security forces northwest of Damascus, and in December 2005, another two alleged members of *Jund al Sham* were killed in a raid at a location near Aleppo. The raid uncovered extremist statements which established the existence of what appeared to be a wide-ranging *Takfiri* Islamist group called *Tanzim Jund al Sham lil-Jihad wal-Tawhid* (Organisation of the Army of Greater Syria for Jihad and Monotheism), replete with publications, administrative structure, intelligence and weaponry. In November 2004, an alleged *Jund al Sham* member was killed attempting to plant a roadside bomb.

In April 2004, four people were killed in a clash between Syrian police and a team of suspected bombers, again in the diplomatic quarter of Damascus. The Syrian authorities at that time accused Sunni militants of trying to blow up an explosives-laden car near the Canadian embassy. An empty United Nations building was heavily damaged in the incident.

### *Jund al Sham* – AQ in Syria?

The timing of the attacks on 12 September, a day after the fifth anniversary of the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, and the release of another video tape of AQ ideologue Ayman al Zawahiri, would suggest a degree of AQ complicity in the attack. However it seems unlikely that this was an AQ attack that was coordinated or planned within a global strategic context. It was most probably orchestrated by a local Islamist cell or group, such as *Jund al Sham*.

Nevertheless, the mode of attack used in Damascus on 12 September bears remarkably similar characteristics to those used by AQ in the Arabian Peninsular (AQAP) during a 2004 wave of attacks in Saudi Arabia. In those, militants launched coordinated assaults against compounds that were designed to break through the layers of security and kill Westerners or Saudi Security Forces inside. The tactic of using a VBIED to breach a protected perimeter and overwhelm defences was also attempted in the failed attack on the Abqaiq oil facility in Saudi Arabia in February 2006. In this respect, the question of whether the Damascus attack is indicative of an AQ offensive in Syria or whether it is a more parochial act of terrorism is pertinent.

The name *Jund al Sham* is derived from *Bilad al Sham*. *Bilad al Sham* or "Greater Syria" is a historical Arabic reference to a region in the Levant encompassing not only Syria, but a wider area including Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. *Jund al Sham* does not imply an exclusive focus on Syria as has been widely reported in the media. Indeed, *Jund al Sham* is a name that has been associated with a number of attacks or plots in Lebanon, Jordan and even Qatar. Groups bearing similar names, such as *Tanzim Jund al Sham* (Organisation of the Army of Greater Syria) that claimed responsibility for the bombing at the Doha theatre in Qatar in March 2005, are often alleged to be different groups: they may actually be part of the same group.

Another *Jund al Sham* is believed to have established itself in 1995 as a splinter group of about thirty members from the Palestinian Salafist terror group *Asbat al Ansar*, based in the Ayn al Hilweh refugee camp in southern Lebanon. Following a wave of assassinations of Lebanese religious leaders and bombings through the early 1990s, *Asbat al Ansar* split into three separate groups: *Asbat al Nour*, *Jama'at al Nur* and *Jund al Sham*.

It is thought that this same *Jund al Sham* emerged as an international terrorist group in 1999 when a large number of their members arrived in Afghanistan at the *al Matar* training camp near Herat. This camp was run by the (now deceased) Jordanian terrorist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and was largely comprised of Levantine Islamists and members from groups including Zarqawi's *al Tawhid wal-Jihad* and *Bayt al Iman*. These groups, unlike AQ, were focused on *al Adou al Qareeb*, or the "near enemy" in their home countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, rather than *al Adou al Baeed*, or the "far enemy" of the US and the West, as define the global *jihad*.

In 1999, the Jordanian government believes that *Jund al Sham* was given \$200,000 by AQ and came under the temporary leadership of Abu Zubaida, a senior AQ commander (now in US custody). Abu Zubaida reportedly planned to build *Jund al Sham* as an AQ affiliate, broadening its activities from Lebanon to include the entire Levant (Israel and the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan) and Egypt. In this wider region, AQ's presence was consid-

ered to be insufficient.

However, *Jund al Sham* began operating autonomously with a view to establishing a caliphate in the Levant. According to reports citing Jordanian intelligence sources, this newly developed *Jund al Sham* federated about 150 Islamist extremists. These included Palestinian refugees from Jordan, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members, Egyptian members and sympathisers of the *Takfir wa Hijra* group. About two dozen remnant members of *Asbat al Ansar* from Lebanon were also believed to be involved.

This newly-amalgamated group meant that *Jund al Sham's* focus on Lebanon shifted with its previously limited membership expanding significantly. This revitalised *Jund al Sham* formulated a number of plots against a wider array of targets, including a number of planned bombings in Jordan in 1999 that were foiled by Jordanian security services. Following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the groups operating in *al Matar* camp dispersed, with many of their respective members re-emerging in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. It appears that as a result of this, *Jund al Sham* fragmented. This may explain the emergence of apparently different groups utilising similar names referencing the same vision of a caliphate in Greater Syria.

The Damascus gun battle on 9 June 2006, resulted in the death of 42 year old shopkeeper, Abu Umar. Umar was the apparent leader of a cell of *Tanzim Jund al Sham lil-Jihad wal-Tawhid*. He was a radical *takfiri*, castigating not only the Syrian state and its institutions, but also the imams of mosques and the institution of the Friday prayer. Alongside a cache of weaponry, documents were reportedly found at a residential apartment in southern Damascus that indicated that this group was engaged in preparing areas in and around Damascus for future terrorist operations and for sending its members abroad for training.

It is not clear whether *Tanzim Jund al Sham lil-Jihad wal-Tawhid* is a part of the *Jund al Sham* network that was formed in the *al Matar* camp, however it seems unlikely that *Tanzim Jund al Sham lil-Jihad wal-Tawhid*, and the cell behind the attacks on the US Embassy in Damascus, if they are indeed linked, are connected to AQ in any operational sense. Indeed it seems likely

that they operate as an autonomous cluster within the global Salafist network, drawing support and ideas from the wider *Jihad* to bear on their goal of Islamist revolution in the Levant.

### **An Ongoing Terror Campaign in Syria and the Levant?**

The attacks were remarkably ambitious and in many ways remarkably naive. The consular district of Damascus is probably the most protected area in the city, and the US Embassy perhaps the most heavily protected embassy. The attack also appears to have been poorly planned: the use of pipe bombs taped to gas cylinders is an extremely crude form of IED for an attack against such a hardened target.

The choice of target may well have been influenced by a more local political agenda than that of AQ's "global jihad" against the west. There is evidence that indiscriminate mass casualty attacks have had an increasingly alienating effect on public opinion in Arab countries. It has often been the case that attacks of this nature have had an international dimension to them in terms of planning, funding, training and propaganda. This foreign involvement in indiscriminate attacks in which more local Muslim citizens have been killed than 'justifiable' western targets, has provoked a strong counter-reaction to these atrocities in Muslim countries. A frontal assault on a US embassy therefore, is politically far more sustainable and profitable for a terrorist group with a local agenda. Widespread frustration and anger on the Syrian street at US policies in the Middle East, from Iraq to Lebanon, and its overt bias towards Israel makes the US a unifying rather than divisive target to potential supporters. Recent reports and rumours in Syria alleging Syrian intelligence cooperation with the US, including the detention and torture of AQ detainees in order to improve relations with Washington have all given rise to a growing propensity to violence among Syria's radical Islamist community against the state.

The Syrian security and intelligence services are extremely powerful and pervasive in Syria and it is very difficult for terrorist groups to operate in the country. It is possible that this may explain why the attackers were unable to assemble a more sophisticated and reliable

VBIED. Furthermore, the apparent lack of planning may have been as a result of stringent security and counter-surveillance measures at the embassy that would deter extensive surveillance of the target. It would seem therefore, that the assault team were relying more upon tactics of shock and surprise at the ferocity of the attack to succeed in breaking into the embassy.

### **Outlook**

Despite Syrian efforts to clamp down on Sunni Salafist terrorism, its proximity to Iraq and its own internal suppression of Islamist groups will render it an ongoing target for terrorist attacks. Widespread anger and frustration at US policies in the Middle East and perceived Syrian complicity that may seem ironic to western observers will also be played upon in an attempt to undermine the Ba'athist regime.

However, it remains unlikely that we will see mass casualty attacks against civilians in Syria in the near future. Targeting will focus on objectives holding popular appeal, such as government buildings and foreign embassies. What remains to be seen is whether Syria will effectively capitalise on this incident to demonstrate its credentials in combating Salafist terrorism and end its political isolation, or whether Islamists extremists will be able to widen the schism between state and society in Syria.

**This article was written by Henry Wilkinson who is an analyst at Janusian Security Risk Management. He can be contacted at [wilkinson@janusian.com](mailto:wilkinson@janusian.com)**