

Britain's war on Syrian terrorism

by Thierry Lalevée

The decision of the British government to break diplomatic relations with Syria on Oct. 24 was remarkable for several reasons. As was revealed afterward, the decision was not unanimous, either in the British cabinet or among those diplomats dealing with the region. Though the names of the cabinet ministers who were lukewarm at the idea, or totally opposed to it, didn't get into the press, other names did.

Led by Sir Patrick Wright, the secretary general of the Foreign Office, himself a former ambassador to Damascus, the club of the late "Arabist" Sir John Glubb Pasha, fought to the last against Thatcher's personal determination to rupture relations. However, their fight was doomed. With the issue posed only two weeks after the Reykjavik summit, Thatcher was determined to send a message not only to Damascus, but ultimately, to Moscow.

By denouncing the British decision with an even louder voice than Damascus, Moscow made clear that it had received the message, and was outraged. The British government was evidently not playing by the rules established in recent years, according to which, even when an intelligence service is caught red-handed, the government is not to be held responsible.

That was indeed, the second remarkable aspect of the London trial of Syrian-sponsored terrorist Nezir Hindawi, his sentencing to 45 years in jail, and the subsequent break with Syria. Without underestimating the need for a judgment which creates a legal precedent, the Hindawi trial in October didn't bring in any unexpected elements. The substance of the accusations against Hindawi was known to British government officials, including the prime minister, by April 18; the very day Hindawi was arrested.

Indeed, by early March, Britain's MI-5 had been able to intercept radio communications between the Syrian embassy in London and Damascus, placing Hindawi at the center of a major international terrorist plot. By the middle of March, the Hindawi tribe in Britain, West Germany, and Italy was under close surveillance; too late to prevent the bombing in West Berlin of the "Germano-Arab Society," but early enough to prevent the massacre on the El Al plane.

It may be argued that the Hindawi brothers should have been arrested then, but there is a sound argument for letting them run loose, as long as there was the possibility of catching them red-handed, while preventing the massacre from taking place. However this meant that each of the movements of Nezir Hindawi, his trips to Tripoli, then to Damascus, and his return to London with high-ranking Syrian intelligence officers such as Lt.-Col. Haitham Said of Air Force intelligence, were followed and recorded.

No doubt that more valuable details did come out of Hindawi's interrogation. It is a safe guess that by the end of April at the latest, the British government was fully aware of the level of involvement of Syria's official intelligence services in terrorism in Britain. A sure indication that this involvement was known, was the hurried but discreet departure from London in late April of Syrian military attaché George Shiha, and the very official expulsion of two Syrian attachés known to have dealt with Hindawi.

The break in diplomatic relations

However, London didn't break with Damascus then. Many reasons have been put forward. One is that London wanted to keep Damascus guessing on the extent of its actual knowledge of the operation, deliberately playing it low and cool to catch them by surprise with the Oct. 24 blow. A more likely explanation is that under pressures of the international and national outcry over Britain's active participation in the April 15 American raid on Tripoli, Thatcher was forced to back off. Then, between April 18 and Oct. 24, a major domestic and international diplomatic battle ensued.

The repeated trips to Damascus of high-ranking American intelligence officials over the summer were not exactly helpful in creating momentum against Syrian terrorism.

The eventual sentencing of Hindawi to 45 years in jail was certainly a key step, but it was above all the political decision to place the blame on official Syria that made the case remarkable. Isn't it the case that many other governments, presented with the same evidence, would have simply concluded that "Syrian intelligence" was involved, but "not the Syrian government."

No doubt the Thatcher government had its own reasons, in line with British strategy toward the Middle East. After all, while it is at loggerheads with Damascus and Tripoli, it still officially welcomes Iranian military delegations to Britain for military spare-parts buying sprees, as happened on Nov. 7.

Nevertheless, Britain has set a very important political and diplomatic precedent in the war against international terrorism; governments will be held responsible for whatever activities their intelligence agents perpetrate, even at the lowest levels. The message was received in Moscow with furor. It was also received in Damascus. It should be evident that Damascus's sudden moderation and decision to actively help gain the release of American and French hostages, dates from Oct. 24.