

Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Syria

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Syria

Designated in 1979 as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, Syria continued its political and military support to various terrorist groups. The regime continued to provide weapons and political support to Hizballah and continued to allow Iran to rearm and finance the terrorist organization. The Assad regime's relationship with Hizballah and Iran grew stronger in 2019 as the regime became more reliant on external actors to fight opponents and secure areas. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) remains present and active in the country with the permission of President Bashar al-Assad. Assad remained a staunch defender of Iran's policies, while Iran exhibited equally energetic support for the Syrian regime. Syrian government speeches and press releases often included statements supporting terrorist groups, particularly Hizballah and vice versa.

Over the past two decades, the Assad regime's permissive attitude towards AQ and other terrorist groups' FTF facilitation efforts during the Iraq conflict fed the growth of AQ, ISIS, and affiliated terrorist networks inside Syria. The Syrian government's awareness and encouragement for many years of terrorists' transit through Syria to Iraq for the purpose of fighting U.S. forces before 2012 is well documented. Those very networks were among the terrorist elements that brutalized the Syrian and Iraqi populations in 2019. Additionally, Shia militia groups in Iraq, some of which are U.S.-designated FTOs aligned with Iran, continued to travel to Syria to fight on behalf of the Assad regime. Marxist groups, including affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), also operated on Syrian soil and represent Turkey's primary counterterrorism concern in Syria. ISIS cells remained active in parts of Syria and launched attacks on civilians and U.S. partner forces. In October, U.S. forces completed an operation that resulted in the death of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi. ISIS members in Syria continued to plot or inspire external terrorist operations.

As part of a broader strategy during the year, the regime portrayed Syria itself as a victim of terrorism, characterizing all internal armed opposition as "terrorists."