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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 remained strong in 2020 as the regime continued to rely heavily 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 toward AQ and other terrorist groups' foreign terrorist fighter (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. The Assad regime released thousands of violent extremists from its prisons in 2011 and 2012, fueling a rise in terrorism within the country, in an attempt to justify its repression of the Syrian people and fracture international support for the Syrian opposition. Those very networks were among the terrorist elements that brutalized the Syrian and Iraqi populations in 2020. Throughout the Syrian conflict, terrorist groups in Syria have often cited the regime's egregious human rights abuses and violations to justify their activities and recruit members. The Assad regime has frequently used counterterrorism laws and special counterterrorism courts to detain and imprison protesters, human rights defenders, humanitarian workers, and others on the pretext of fighting terrorism. Additionally, Shia militia groups in Iraq, some of which are U.S.-designated terrorist organizations aligned with Iran, continued to travel to Syria to fight on behalf of the Assad regime. Affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party 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 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISIS members in Syria continued to plot or inspire external terrorist operations.

As part of a broader strategy used throughout the last decade, the regime continued to portray Syria itself as a victim of terrorism, characterizing all internal armed opposition members as "terrorists."

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