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From the Baltimore Sun

Gunmen attack U.S. Embassy in Syria; al-Qaida tie suspected

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Sun reporter

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WASHINGTON -- Gunmen with grenades and automatic weapons stormed the American Embassy in Damascus, Syria, early yesterday, the fifth major terrorist attack on the U.S. government outside of Iraq and Afghanistan since Sept. 11, 2001.

The low-tech but brazen terrorist attack could reflect a shift in targets to more vulnerable U.S. outposts overseas, current and former intelligence officials say.

A Syrian guard was killed and at least 11 wounded in the 10:10 a.m. assault on the U.S. compound in the capital. No Americans were injured.

Syria's ambassador to the United States said he suspected that an al-Qaida splinter group, Jund al-Sham, had carried out the attack, the Associated Press reported. No group immediately claimed responsibility.

"Syria is a safe haven for a number of these groups," said Rohan Gunaratna, the author of *Inside al-Qaeda*, who heads a terrorism research center in Singapore.

However, some terrorism experts said the gunmen could have been dispatched from al-Qaida's wing in Iraq.

A team of four attackers driving two trucks loaded with explosives reportedly charged the embassy shouting, "God is great." One truck exploded; the other was disarmed safely. Three assailants were killed in the attack, and the fourth, who was wounded, was being questioned by Syrian security services.

The Syrian Embassy issued a statement saying: "U.S. policies in the Middle East have fueled extremism, terrorism and anti-U.S. sentiment," and said Washington should review its policies in light of the attack.

Overseas targets

Intelligence officials and specialists on terrorism said the incident appears to be an example of the threat posed by an increasingly fragmented cluster of radical Islamic groups that want to attack the United States.

The attack follows strikes by al-Qaida-affiliated groups on U.S. diplomatic facilities in Karachi, Pakistan; Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; and Tashkent, Uzbekistan; between 2002 and 2004, according to the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism in Oklahoma City.

A bombing in March at a Marriott hotel near the U.S. Consulate in Karachi killed four people, including an American diplomat.

Prior to the Sept. 11 attacks, al-Qaida militants killed more than 220 people, including 12 American diplomats, in bombings at the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, on Aug. 7, 1998. Seventeen American sailors died in the attack on the destroyer USS Cole in the Yemeni port of Aden on Oct. 12, 2000.

The most recent strike is further evidence that terrorist groups may be focusing their efforts on U.S. government targets overseas because they are easier to attack, said Paul Pillar, a former top Middle East analyst for the CIA.

"We've been so focused on the question of homeland security, and understandably and properly so, that we the American people have collectively tended to lose sight of the multiple vulnerabilities that Americans, including American officials, have overseas," Pillar said.

Terrorist groups must make a calculation of their likelihood of success, Pillar said, and location is a major part of the equation. Embassies and other overseas targets reflect an "operational opportunity" in the minds of terrorists, he said.

Inside the U.S. government, there is concern about the potential for a surge in attacks on American embassies, said an intelligence official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The official said he was worried about "copycat" bombings.

"I worry about the precedent," he said. "Do they regard these embassies as softer targets in some way?"

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also expressed concern about the vulnerability of U.S. embassies.

"It's the case, unfortunately, that it is possible for people to make attacks of this kind despite the fact that we do make an extraordinary effort to protect our people," she told reporters.

After the 1998 bombings in Africa, the State Department overhauled security at U.S. embassies, such as creating a 100-foot setback from the street. A State Department official could not say last night whether the U.S. Embassy in Damascus had been rebuilt to the new specifications, but another official said security improvements have been made at all American embassies.

Even with the new measures, the embassies are vulnerable because they rely on host countries for much of their security and people are continuously moving in and out of the buildings, said David Cid, a former FBI counterterrorism official who is now deputy director of the Oklahoma terrorism institute.

"There are just some vulnerabilities that we can't mitigate," he said, and that puts added importance on the need for strong intelligence relationships with host countries.

U.S. relations with Syria have been frosty, especially since the conflict in Lebanon between Israel and the Hezbollah militia, which receives support from Syria and Iran.

However, intelligence cooperation between Syria and the United States on terrorism inside Syria might be better because attacks within Syria's borders threaten its government as well, Pillar said.

Jund al-Sham

Syria is particularly concerned about Jund al-Sham, which could explain why it suspects that the group is behind yesterday's embassy attack. The group wants to overthrow the Syrian government and establish a radical Islamic caliphate to rule the country.

According to the Oklahoma terrorism institute, Jund al-Sham, whose name means Soldiers of the Levant, was formed in 1999 under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who went on to lead al-Qaida in Iraq and was killed by the U.S. military in June. The Levant is the region in the Middle East that includes Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the group scattered. The name re-emerged in recent years, and the group has

claimed responsibility for attacks in Syria, Lebanon and Qatar.

Syrian authorities see Jund al-Sham as a major threat and have arrested several of its members. But some experts are skeptical of the threat the group poses and say that the Syrian government overplays the danger in order to bolster its anti-terrorism credentials.

Whether or not Jund al-Sham was behind yesterday's attack, the strike reflects a trend in activity by what appear to be al-Qaida splinter groups or sympathizers, counterterrorism specialists say.

The attack was likely to have been carried out by one of two types of al-Qaida-affiliated groups, said Kamran Bokari, a Middle East specialist with Statfor, a security consulting firm - either an al-Qaida sympathizer group based in Lebanon, such as Jund al-Sham, or a group affiliated with al-Qaida in Iraq.

"The most likely is this is an Iraqi node," he said, noting that the attack was similar to one that al-Zarqawi mounted at hotels in Jordan last year in an effort to expand his influence beyond Iraq.

The U.S. government has been concerned that Syria has become a way station for Iraqi insurgent groups, according to a U.S. intelligence official.

Al-Qaida in Iraq also has safe houses in Syria, Bokari said, noting that the group's newly anointed leader, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, who recently released his first video message, might be trying to establish himself.

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The time of the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Syria was misstated when this article was published in the print edition. The Sun regrets the error.

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