

Damascus 'Very Cooperative' in War on Terror

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Syrian legal experts say their country deserves more credit from the United States and other states for its cooperation in fighting terrorism and crime.

The Syrian interior ministry hosted a 28-country conference on terrorism and crime in the Middle East this week.

Interpol secretary-general Ronald Noble told a press conference in Damascus that Syria was “very cooperative” in the fight against terrorism.

The German news agency DPA quoted Noble as saying that cooperation from nations like Syria and Iran had given Interpol access to details and photos of some 8,900 wanted individuals.

His remarks were a boost for Damascus as it attempts to rebuild its credibility with the international community.

The US did not attend the conference in Damascus.

The US administration has accused the Syrian state of sponsoring terrorist activity, backing the Palestinian group Hamas and the Lebanese Hizbollah, and allowing insurgents to infiltrate into Iraq through its borders.

The Syrians deny these accusation, and are trying to show they are cooperative on issues like terrorism and organised, cross-border crime.

"We all know that fighting terrorism cannot be successful without regional and international cooperation, and no country can boast that it is able to fight terrorism independently of other countries," Syrian deputy interior minister Saker Kheir Beik said at the press conference attended by Noble.

Legal experts attending the event asserted that Syria cooperated with Interpol.

"Syria is trying to counter the American perspective in particular, and the western view in general, that it supports terrorism," said a local lawyer, adding that Syria is itself “affected by terrorism and terror groups”.

Safa Otani, chair of criminal law at Damascus University's law college, said that modern technology had contributed to increased transnational crime, underlining the need for countries to work together.

Corruption, embezzlement and money-laundering are “no less dangerous than terrorism”, he said.

At the press conference noted that Interpol “has no jurisdictions, has no involvement, has no comment on state activity”.

Otani praised Interpol for adhering to principles “that are not subject to the double-standard policies or orders from countries like the United States”.

Critics note that when Syria does find common cause with western states, for example in pursuing Islamic extremists, its methods are often called into question.

A Damascus-based human rights lawyer argued that western nations are often willing to turn a blind eye to human rights violations in counter-terrorism cases. He noted that western diplomats have frequently attended trials of Islamists at the State Security Court over the past three years. Thousands of sympathisers of Salafism, a fundamentalist strand of Sunni Islam, have been arrested in Syria.

One case that attracted international attention was that of Syrian-Canadian Maher Arar, allegedly tortured in Syria after being sent there by the US in 2002.

The lawyer concluded that counter-terrorism is “one of the most powerful cards Syria has”.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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