

Syria - U.S. Policy Directions

Statement submitted to the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate on October 30, 2003, by Richard W. Murphy, Senior Fellow for the Middle East, Council on Foreign Relations.

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for your invitation to testify to the committee on the current direction of U.S. policy towards Syria.

The current state of US-Syrian relations is poor and, regrettably, I see no early prospect of significant improvement. The sense of mutual frustration in Washington and Damascus is sharp, and the prospect that this will add tensions to an already highly unstable region is worrisome. Each perceives the other as deaf to its positions and neither displays much readiness to accommodate the other. The Administration views Syria as unresponsive to its demands to curb terrorism and to cooperate fully with Washington on Iraq. Syria considers America's regional policy so biased towards Israel that it overlooks how insecure this makes Syria, and other Arab states.

The United States has played the indispensable role since the 1973 war in communicating between Syria and Israel, and at times actively mediated negotiations for an overall agreement. Many in Washington have recognized that while Damascus can be irritating and frustrating to deal with, Syria has the potential to play a key role in establishing a general peace in the region. This paradox has kept successive American presidents and secretaries of state convinced of the value in maintaining a dialogue with Damascus. For its part, Syria has consistently wanted to maintain a dialogue with Washington, despite the stormy political relationship.

The President and senior officials have disavowed any intent to invade Syria, stating that there are other ways to resolve our disagreements. However, for a variety of reasons including differences over the definition of terrorism, Lebanon, and Iraq policy, tensions between the two countries are increasing. The White House withdrawal of its earlier opposition to congressional action on the Syrian Accountability Act is a clear signal of this.

Two American initiatives could reverse the downward spiral of US-Syrian relations: restarting the Arab-Israeli peace process and US sponsorship of negotiations for a WMD free zone in the Middle East. Both present tough but not insuperable challenges. Without our undertaking one or both, I suspect that the American appetite for regime change in Damascus will increase, as Damascus remains obstinate because it sees few incentives to behave differently.

I. Sources of Syrian-US Frictions: Terrorism, Lebanon, Iraq

Syrian attitude towards terrorism

One of the sorest points in the US-Syrian relationship has been Syria's sponsorship of groups which Washington considers terrorist. We disagree over what constitutes terrorism. Damascus considers that Washington deliberately blurs the distinction between terrorism and legitimate acts of national resistance. Thus it could fully cooperate with the US, for at least the first year following 9/11, against al-Qaeda, which it agreed had engaged in illegitimate attacks on innocents. But it classifies as legitimate resistance any organizations connected with the Arab-Israeli conflict. This includes the religiously inspired organizations, such as the Lebanese Hizbollah militia and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas, and the several radical secular Palestinian factions, such as the PFLP-GC. All of these have had representatives in Damascus.

Washington reportedly has evidence that operational orders have been given from these offices and that the leaders are not there just for public relations purposes as claimed. After Secretary Powell's last visit to Damascus the Syrian government closed the offices of the Palestinian factions, but the personnel involved continue to live in Syria. The Syrian government has said that these individuals cannot be expelled because they have no place to go.

Israel's October 5 attack on what it called a terrorist training site a dozen or so miles from Damascus was its first attack on Syrian territory since 1973. There was no Syrian military reaction. President Bashar al-Asad said that "what happened will only make Syria's role more effective and influential in events in the region..." Was this a threat of a Syrian reply through proxies such as Hizbollah and Palestinian extremists? It may simply have been his way of acknowledging Syria's own incapacity for any meaningful military

reply. Its military strength has eroded; its principal arms supplier, the USSR, is no more; and no supplier is interested in extending Syria credit for arms.

Administration officials have noted pointedly that Syria is “on the wrong side” of the war against terrorism, and have implied serious consequences if Syria does not change its behavior. Influential advocates of action against Syria outside the Administration have publicly urged the “roll back”, (words which presumably mean “overthrow”) of the Syrian regime. These threats have pushed Syria off balance and may explain its decision to soft pedal the deep penetration by US forces into Syria in hot pursuit of a convoy of trucks last June, and our subsequent detention for several days of Syrian border guards.

Lebanon

The Syrian military presence in Lebanon is an older bone of contention. The US first criticized Syria’s military presence in Lebanon in 1982, using a formula calling for the departure from Lebanon of “all foreign forces”, i.e. Syrian and Israeli. In 2000 when Israel pulled its own forces out from its eighteen year occupation of southern Lebanon, America did not immediately demand that Syria do the same. In part this was because doubts have persisted in some quarters in Beirut and Washington that Lebanon, in the aftermath of its long civil war, could afford to dispense with the Syrian military presence. For its part Syria consistently defended its presence as one invited by Lebanon in 1975, and also as necessary for Syria’s own security, citing the threat to Syria posed by Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Secretary of State Powell in March revived the demand that Syria remove all its forces from Lebanon. In language not generally used by the Secretary concerning that situation, Powell called for Damascus to end its “occupation.”

Iraq

A further friction developed just as the Bush Administration was entering office. Syria began to test a new pipeline from Iraq, connecting with a long disused pipeline across Syria, to the Mediterranean. Washington protested that this was breaking the UN sanctions, which only allowed the export of Iraqi oil under the UN “Oil for Food” program. Syria disingenuously replied that it was only testing the pipeline, asking in any case why Washington was permitting both Jordan and Turkey to benefit economically from Iraqi oil while coming down hard on Syria.

Last spring, Washington's frustrations with Syria exploded into sharp anger as it charged Damascus with continuing to allow shipment of military materiel to Iraq, a traffic which the US had urged it to stop for at least a year prior to the Iraqi war. In post-war Iraq, Washington has also accused Syria of allowing infiltration of *jihadis* from Syria and other Arab and Muslim countries to target American and other coalition forces, and pressed Syria to return official Iraqi bank balances.

II. Syrian Efforts to Develop Weapons of Mass Destruction

Damascus probably has missile warheads loaded with chemicals and a large stockpile of missiles. This has been talked about for at least the past fifteen years. Some years back Israeli intelligence privately acknowledged that this Syrian capability has probably been developed for defensive, not offensive, purposes. Syria may also have researched biological weapons, but less is known of this program. The United States has criticized Syria's chemical and biological weapons programs and some assert that it is seeking nuclear weapons.

Syria scoffs at the American view that the Arabs have nothing to fear from Israeli possession of WMD, but that Israel has everything to fear from their possessing WMD. Syria stresses that it has real security concerns vis-à-vis Israel.

III. Syria's Uneasy Relations with its Neighbors

Syrian orators often recall the memory of their capital's past glories. They describe Damascus as the leader of the Arab East and superior, morally at least, to most of the Arab World. Their leaders used to attack the behavior of other Arab leaders such as Egypt's Sadat and Jordan's King Hussein for weakening Arab Unity through engaging in unilateral negotiations with Israel. Syria has consistently maintained that a general and lasting Arab-Israeli peace could have been achieved much earlier had Arab ranks remained united. They proudly contrasted Syria's preservation of a "principled position of steadfastness" with Egyptian and Jordanian "betrayal of Arab Unity." The fact that Sadat achieved through negotiations the return of all of Egypt's territory occupied by Israel in 1967, and not through "steadfastness" but rather through a more practical bargaining position, is an

awkward and unmentioned fact. This assertion that Syria always takes a principled stand understandably galls other Arabs.

Damascus has long viewed its neighbors in Lebanon and Jordan as somehow less legitimate entities than Syria, even in its truncated condition caused by its loss of territory engineered by France and Britain after the First World War. This mindset has led Syria to reject proposals to exchange embassies with Lebanon ever since Syrian and Lebanese independence in 1946, and to its readiness in the eighties to engage in activities destabilizing to Jordan.

Syria respects Israel's military might and has chosen not to join battle with Israel since 1973. Historians one day may find evidence that in his collaboration with President Anwar Sadat in their surprise attack on Israel in 1973, President Hafez al-Asad shared the same assumption as the Egyptian leader: the war aimed at a political, not a military, "victory"; something had to be done to bring the Arab-Israeli stalemate to world attention; and the United States needed a push to restart negotiations for its resolution. This worked out well for Egypt, which achieved a full return of its territory. But Israel showed no interest in continuing to negotiate with Syria after its first disengagement agreement in 1974. Israel preferred, as Abba Eban once said, to focus on making peace with Egypt, the country that could make war.

Perhaps because it has throughout history experienced foreign meddling in its neighborhood, Damascus has tended to see the establishment of Israel as just another move by the West to establish a bridgehead to divide and weaken the Arabs. Damascus has never understood the passion behind the logic of Zionism. Syrians from all walks of life have long enjoyed repeating the myth that over the front entrance of the Knesset in Jerusalem is the inscription "From the Nile to the Euphrates," signifying Zionism's expansionist aims. Throughout the eighties Hafez al-Asad said he saw no differences between Israeli political leaders who in his opinion were all committed to expanding Israel's territorial limits, a goal which he was determined to do everything in his power to prevent.

While asserting that Arab Unity must be the primary goal of all Arabs, Damascus keeps a close eye on Syria's national interests. When Hafez al-Asad, Syria's President from 1970 to 2000, disagreed with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the seventies, he did not hesitate, despite wide Arab World support for Arafat, to set up a rival Palestinian civil and military leadership. Similarly in 1975 al-Asad came to the help of Lebanon's Maronite President

when he was asked to send troops to fight the Palestinians. In 1983 Syrian artillery fired on Arafat's forces in Tripoli, Lebanon.

On another front, al-Asad found it expedient to cooperate with Shiite Iran beginning in 1982, in supporting the creation and subsequent training and funding of the Shiite Hizbollah militia in Lebanon. That was the same year in which he brutally suppressed a religiously based Syrian organization, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. Some have explained his readiness to work with Iran as reflecting his uneasiness at being a member of Syria's minority Alawite community, long treated as second class by the majority Sunni population. It is just as likely that he was comfortable working with any force, whether secular or religious, which bolstered Syria's leadership at home and in the region.

IV. Impact of the US Occupation of Iraq on Syria

The removal of Saddam's regime is a political gain for Syria. Forgotten amid the welter of accusations leveled against Damascus today is the fact that for 30 years al-Asad and Saddam were political rivals and occasional enemies.

But the elimination of Saddam's regime proved costly. The war brought an immediate shutdown of the oil pipeline between the two countries. Syria had been profiting by as much as \$1 billion a year through importing heavily discounted Iraqi oil for its domestic consumption and exporting its own production at world prices. This revenue source is unlikely to resume.

There are no reliable Iraqi-Syria trade statistics, but over the past five years Iraq became an increasingly important market for Syrian exporters. Baghdad presumably wanted to reward the Syrian government for its cooperation on arms supply, and favored Syrian merchants for contracts under the UN "Oil for Food" program.

One irony of the post-war situation is that while the United States Congress has been debating the Syrian Accountability Act, which includes the option of applying rigorous economic sanctions, the US military in Iraq has encouraged Syrian exports to Iraq. It has authorized, for example, purchases of Syrian propane gas for Iraqi households, and allowed power swaps between northern Syria and the city of Mosul. In a demonstration of Syrian entrepreneurial skills, the volume of trade in "white" consumer goods

between Syrian factories and its trading companies and the Iraqi market, has steadily increased. American investment, outside of three companies operating in the energy sector, remains minimal. The two way trade between the United States and Syria is just over the \$300 million level.

Syria has not made it easy for foreign investors and it has failed to unleash the energies and talents of its own business community. In part this probably reflects the Baath Party's doctrinal suspicion of businessmen in general and its view that all outsiders are out to exploit Syria and provide no benefit in return. Today the Syrian economy is sluggish. The decision of President Bashar al-Asad in his first year in office to privatize the banking industry, a surprising challenge to longstanding Baath party doctrine, has yet to have a practical result.

V. Past Actions to Influence Syrian Policy

Syria, in common with most countries, responds to both carrots and sticks. The close cooperation developed by Henry Kissinger with al-Asad in 1974 produced the Golan disengagement. Syria has fully respected the terms of that agreement for 30 years: there has been no infiltration or other provocations launched against Israel from that sector.

As for its responding to sticks, there is the memorable example set by Turkey in 1998. Long frustrated by Syria's harboring of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, Ankara thereupon demanded his expulsion and moved its army to the border. Damascus expelled Ocalan and he was finally seized by Turkish agents in Kenya.

Israel's October 5 attack on a Syrian site was chosen to send a political message, not to kill Syrians. It is reasonable to assume, however, that if Israel traces any terrorist acts as having been directly ordered from Damascus by Palestinian groups located there, or if there is a major revival of Hizbollah attacks across the Lebanese-Israeli border, the Sharon government may decide to repeat its message against Syria on a broader scale. The consequences of that decision are unpredictable. It is probable that at some point the Syrian leadership will feel obliged to find a way to reply and risk a broader conflict in the region. That is, what Bashar al-Asad will "understand" from the Israeli use of force, will be his need to respond in kind.

VI. Options for US Policy. Sanctions? Peace Process? WMD Free Zone?

The Syria Accountability Act contains a provision for broad economic sanctions on Syria. Given the limited US-Syrian trade and investment, our leverage is small. Washington could urge Syria's neighbors to cut off their trading links with Syria, but they probably would be unwilling to do so. The United States should reflect on the wisdom of cutting trade in light of the harm done to the Iraqi population, but not its leadership, during the thirteen years of U.N. sanctions against that country.

Does Syria feel enough pressure, or sense sufficient rewards ahead to comply with Washington's demands to expel known Palestinian extremist leaders, assure that Hizbollah will continue to avoid provocative cross border actions, and to close its borders more effectively to *jihadis* seeking a holy war against American forces in Iraq?

Syria may find it in its interests to do some of the above. Any public action taken by Damascus against Palestinians, however, carries some risk for Syria; it could negatively affect its 400,000 resident Palestinians. This could be a problem for Syria given the current stalemate in the peace process.

Syria would unquestionably like to be part of a reinvigorated peace effort. It is as anxious today as ever that its interests not be overlooked and sees that best achieved through a revival of negotiations under the peace process. Unfortunately, there seems little early prospect of renewed US activity in terms of Israeli-Palestinian talks and none affecting the Syrian-Israeli and Lebanese-Israeli tracks.

There should be attention given to the question of whether it would serve America's regional interests to sponsor negotiations for a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Current American policy is to treat each nation's WMD programs, Israel excepted, as a separate problem and to threaten, or persuade each country in turn, to stop such programs. Since Pakistan and India carried out their atomic tests in 1998, the pace of proliferation has increased. We have fought a war with Iraq because of its programs. We view with alarm Iran's alleged efforts to develop nuclear weapons and Syria's pursuit of WMD. The rumored Saudi interest in acquiring nuclear technology from Pakistan is disquieting. This is not a

country by country problem, but a larger challenge facing the United States and the entire region.

The conventional wisdom in Washington seems to be that it would be bad policy, not to mention bad politics, to go beyond a rhetorical call for a Middle East free of WMD. The problems of verification in the region are described as virtually insuperable. Of at least equal importance, it is said that any such effort would bring Washington into an unproductive, head on confrontation with Israel.

True, Israel has usually shied away from any discussion of its own WMD arsenal. Usually, that is, but not always. In 1995 Israeli Foreign Minister Peres stated Israel's readiness to sign the NPT two years after a regional peace agreement. The nuclear issue was raised but quickly cut off in a Knesset debate in 2000. However, on October 12, 2003, *the Los Angeles Times* published an extraordinary story by its reporter Douglas Frantz in which he described leaks by senior Israeli and American officials about outfitting Israeli submarines with nuclear tipped missiles. This was described as a signal to Iran of Israeli determination not to allow an Iranian nuclear weapons program to proceed.

This indication of a new willingness by Israeli sources not only to acknowledge their country's possession of a nuclear arsenal but to describe its potential use raises the question of whether Israel would balk at an American initiative to engage it in negotiations for a region free of WMD. Even though Frantz's Israeli sources claimed anonymity, and the leaks he reported were therefore officially deniable, the story is a hint that Israel may be rethinking how to use its possession of WMD as deterrence. Clearly verification procedures of a WMD free zone would have to meet the most demanding standards. Guarantees of Israeli security through peace agreements, together with bilateral US commitments, would be required. But any approach which might restrain the rush to acquire nuclear, chemical and biological warfare capabilities in the volatile Middle East should be explored. It would also help to rebuild American credentials as a dependable mediator in the Middle East if Washington were to lead regional negotiations on WMD.

In sum, despite all of the historical baggage which burdens the US-Syrian dialogue, there are a few steps we each can take to improve the relationship, to calm rising tensions and to avoid a broader war.