

Removing Syria from the Narcotics List:

A Signal to Damascus?

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Brief Analysis

In a region where subtle messages often serve as political discourse, the Clinton Administration may be communicating to Syria that the United States is changing its approach to Damascus. One step the Administration is considering is especially likely to send such a signal: declaring that Syria is no longer a major producing or transit country for illicit drugs, a dubious distinction it has long shared with other countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Colombia, Iran and Nigeria. Another has been the Administration's opposition to Congressional calls for expanded economic sanctions against Syria. Additionally, the Syrians may be taking notice of Washington's vocal opposition to Iran and Iraq's pursuit of unconventional weapons compared with the Administration's relative public silence about Syria's own advanced program of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the missiles to deliver them.

Possible Removal of Syria from the Narcotics List: On November 1, the Administration was due to submit its list of countries which it has designated as major illicit drug producing or transit countries. Syria has been on this list since its inception nearly ten years ago, largely due to Syria's control over Lebanon's Bekaa Valley which had long been a major opiate producing region. This year, however, the State Department is convinced that illicit drug cultivation in the Bekaa has been virtually eradicated and, therefore, is recommending that Lebanon and Syria (as the occupying power over the Bekaa) not be designated as a major illicit drug producing or transit country.

> Technically, a major drug producing country is one in which 1,000 hectares (or 10 million square meters) or more of illicit opium poppy or coca are cultivated or harvested during a year, or 5,000 or more hectares of illicit cannabis (marijuana) are cultivated or harvested during a year. It is this technical definition that the State Department believes no longer applies to Lebanon or Syria. However, there is little dispute that laboratories in the Bekaa continue to be used to manufacture and refine raw drug materials into finished narcotics such as cocaine and heroin.

> Although Syria may no longer meet the technical definition of a major illicit drug producing country, there is ample evidence that it continues to be a major illicit drug transit country. U.S. Government officials say that Syria has not significantly changed its narcotics trafficking behavior as documented in last year's annual State Department, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, which described Syria as:

a major transit country for hashish leaving Lebanon and for opium and morphine entering Lebanon from Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey; in many cases, shipments proceed onward to Europe and the United States. Acetic anhydride, a precursor chemical used in the processing of heroin, also reportedly entered Lebanon from Syria in 1996. There were continuing reports during the year that members of the Syrian military stationed in Lebanon profited from drug trafficking there. This behavior indicates that the Syria's involvement in narcotics may have shifted from drug cultivation to drug trafficking. If this is the case, Washington may find that its anti-drug policy will become more difficult as it may be harder to crack down on Syria's drug trafficking than drug cultivation because Syrian military and other officials (and some say Asad's family) reportedly earn substantial income from drug

trafficking whereas the income from drug crop cultivation mostly went to Lebanese farmers and radical groups in the Bekaa Valley, such as Hezbollah. However, the State Department opposes designating Syria as a major illicit drug transit country because the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has not found that Syria's transit activities "significantly affect the United States"-a requirement of the technical definition for major illicit drug transit countries.

Opposition to Increased Sanctions Against Syria: During the summer, both houses of Congress voted overwhelmingly to increase sanctions on Syria and Sudan, the only two state-sponsors of international terrorism not subject to a ban on financial transactions, despite strong objections from the Administration. For Sudan, the Administration's opposition was somewhat technical, relating to operational matters such as humanitarian assistance and diplomatic activities. For Syria, however, the Administration's opposition was more fundamental, wanting to keep its current financial carrot of \$226 million in U.S. exports to Syria and the possibility of more business deals to entice Damascus back to the negotiating table with Israel. (At least two American companies, Conoco and Coastal, are now considering major energy deals with Syria.) Then, last week, citing Sudan's sponsorship of international terrorism, religious persecution and abysmal human rights record, the President signed an executive order imposing a comprehensive trade embargo against Khartoum. This move effectively undermines the Congressional legislation, enabling the Administration to sidestep increased sanctions on Syria.

Low-Key Response to Syria's Continued Pursuit of Nonconventional Weapons:As the Administration grapples with two proliferation-related policy issues-confronting Iraq on UNSCOM inspections and deciding whether to impose Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) penalties on foreign companies-Syria's WMD program goes virtually unnoticed. In fact, Syria is the only country in the Middle East with a confirmed, operational capability of ballistic missiles tipped with chemical and possibly biological warheads. In September, Jane's Defence Weekly reported that Syria was set to begin producing chemical bomblets for the warheads of 'Scud C' ballistic missiles to create a more lethal warhead than are now fitted on its 'Scud B' missiles. In April, an Israeli newspaper reported that Syria was mounting the deadly nerve agent VX onto surface-to-surface missiles capable of reaching targets throughout Israel. While the Administration has made some headway in blocking some conventional arms sales to Damascus, little public attention is paid to what is perhaps one of the most advanced weapons of mass destruction threat in the region.

Conclusions: Washington has long faced a policy dilemma regarding Syria, a country which often behaves like a rogue state-by sponsoring international terrorism, trafficking in narcotics and pursuing weapons of mass destruction-but has shown some willingness to work with the Washington on the Middle East peace process and participate in the Israel-Lebanon Monitoring Group. Citing this mix in Syrian behavior, the Administration has used some tough measures (e.g., including Syria on nearly every sanctions "black list") but has not followed a sustained, all-around pressure approach that could exploit Syrian President Assad's weaknesses and bring about a fundamental change in Syrian behavior. In this context, the Administration's likely announcement that Syria will no longer be designated as an uncooperative narco-state, combined with its opposition to sanctions that would treat Syria on par with the other terrorist-sponsoring countries in the Middle East and its relative silence about Syria's accelerated development of weapons of mass destruction, may signal Damascus that it is earning Washington's "seal of approval"-with very little to show for it.

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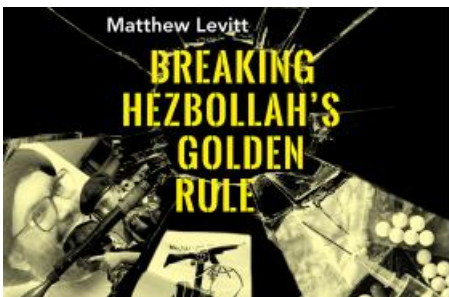
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