

# Assad State of Affairs:

## Syria's Dictatorship Survives to Fight Another Day

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**W**hen Hafez al-Assad was president-for-life of Syria, Washington overlooked the misdeeds of his Baathist dictatorship because it always seemed the brass ring of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace deal was just around the corner. Now that Assad is dead and his son Bashar nears the six-year mark of his own rule, Washington is again in effect tolerating the Baathist dictatorship. This time, the explanation is that not peace, but war is just around the corner -- in Iraq. With so much on the administration's Middle East agenda, Syria seems poised once more to escape penalty from Washington.

If mere condemnations could kill, Syria would long since be in the morgue. Last week, the State Department spokesman denounced Syria for its heavy-handed treatment of political reformers. In mid-May, U.N. ambassador John Bolton criticized Syria for refusing to recognize the independence of Lebanon. Before that, the administration censured Damascus for its sponsorship of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which had orchestrated yet another bloody attack in Israel.

The most frequent U.S. complaint these days concerns Syrian mischief in Iraq. Even before the U.S. invasion began in March 2003, the administration was condemning Damascus for shipping military materiel to Saddam. Recent complaints have centered on the transit of jihadists through Syria to Iraq, and on Syria's provision of safe haven to insurgent leaders. In 2005, Washington went a step further, accusing Damascus of maintaining training camps for Iraqi insurgents, an affront so egregious that the American ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, warned publicly that "U.S. patience with Syria [was] running out."

But criticism rolls off Assad's back, and it has not been accompanied by measures compelling Syria to change its behavior. Whether Washington has been unwilling or unable to extract a real price from Syria, the effect is the same: Damascus believes it has dodged the bullet. The regime of Bashar Assad appears more confident than at any time since 2003.

To be sure, the administration has tried to ratchet up pressure. But its policy has suffered from inconsistency, even ambivalence. The Syria Accountability Act, requiring the president to choose from an array of sanctions, provides a

good illustration. In 2002, the administration balked at signing this legislation, fearing that sanctions would prompt Damascus to stop cooperating with Washington on al Qaeda. But in 2003, the president did sign it into law -- and the very same week, a new ambassador was dispatched to Damascus after a hiatus of four months. The timing no doubt sent a mixed message to the Syrians, taking the sting out of the law.

U.S. ambivalence has also been evident in the willingness to dialogue with President Assad even as Syria was contributing to rising American casualties in Iraq. The administration inexplicably spent three years trying to convince Assad that Syrian interests would be served by more moderate policies. Between 2003 and 2005 the Departments of State, Defense, Treasury, and the National Security Council dispatched five senior delegations to Damascus to cajole, and later warn, President Assad that there would be consequences for continued Syrian meddling in Iraq and support for terrorism. These discussions only succeeded in alleviating pressure on the regime by delaying the imposition of tougher measures. Adding insult to injury, these trips, though the emissaries delivered blunt messages, were publicly spun by Syrian officials as "breakthroughs" in Syrian-U.S. relations.

The Bush administration's only real policy successes on Syria have come at the United Nations. Since 2004, the administration has orchestrated a series of Security Council resolutions that have proved devastating to Syrian interests. First and foremost, Resolution 1559 called for an end to the decades-long Syrian presence in Lebanon and the disarming of Hezbollah, while Resolutions 1595 and 1636 established a U.N.-led investigation into the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri and demanded cooperation from Syria, almost certainly a central player in the killing.

After Hariri's murder, it seemed that all the stars were aligned to lower the boom on Damascus. Not only were the appropriate U.N. resolutions in place, but the assassination spurred a rapprochement between the United States and France in opposition to Syria. Alas, to date the administration has been unable to capitalize on this multilateral moment. The final U.N. report on the Hariri murder is due this month, but absent any smoking gun Assad and company may again emerge unscathed.

In practice, since 2005, the administration's moves against Syria have been largely unilateral: terrorist designations of Syrian officials, for example, and provision of financial support to Syrian reformers. The administration did implement Patriot Act Section 311 sanctions against the Commercial Bank of Syria, requiring U.S. banks to cease dealings with the Syrian bank. While these are arguably the most severe sanctions ever leveled against the Syrians, most unilateral actions have had only a marginal effect.

Indeed, in the three years since the administration chose to ratchet up pressure, Syrian behavior on key issues has seen only incremental change.

On Iraq, Syria reinforced its border and modified visa-entry procedures, making jihadi transit a little more difficult. Yet, according to administration officials, insurgent leaders continue to reside in Syrian safe havens orchestrating operations in Iraq.

On Lebanon, despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops, Damascus remains a significant player and is suspected of involvement in several post-Hariri political murders. Syria continues to support Palestinian terrorist organizations, and arms shipments from Tehran to Hezbollah via Damascus transit Syria unmolested.

After years of threats and condemnations, what has Washington really accomplished with regard to Damascus? Precious little. Syria continues to undermine several strategic U.S. goals in the region, particularly in Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon. What's more, in the process, Syria is damaging U.S. credibility in the region.

A few examples provide clarity: In 2001 Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Damascus to win assurances that Syria would stop illegally importing oil from Iraq. Powell declared victory, but one year later illegal oil imports were up by 50,000 barrels per day. The affronts continued in 2003, when the Syrian government authorized buses to

transport military-aged males to Iraq (departing from Damascus Fair Grounds) to fight U.S. forces.

More recently, U.S. credibility has been undercut by Syria's blatant obstruction of the U.N. investigation into Hariri's death. Indeed, on the day the second report was issued, Gibran Tuani -- a prominent Lebanese journalist, member of parliament, and leading critic of Syria -- was assassinated, also probably by the Syrians.

Finally, there is the issue of Syria's stance on Washington's Middle East democracy-promotion agenda. In the face of the February 2006 U.S. pledge to provide \$5 million to Syrian reformers, Syria has embarked on a crackdown against civil society, arresting dozens of reformers. One individual of whom the regime has made an example is Kamal Labwani. Labwani was arrested in November 2005 following his return from Washington, where he had met with senior administration officials responsible for democracy promotion. President Bush mentioned Labwani in a speech after his arrest. Four months later, Labwani was charged with crimes that carry the death penalty. Implementation of this sentence hangs in the balance.

U.S. inaction on all of these fronts has given Damascus the distinct impression that Washington lacks firmness of purpose. In turn, this has given the Syrians a new lease on life in Lebanon and has rejuvenated the regime's dealings with Palestinian terrorists. If Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's most recent visit to Damascus (in January) is any indication, it also appears to have been a catalyst for a reinvigorated relationship with Iran. Judging from the recent Syrian crackdown on internal democratic opposition, Assad also remains undeterred by U.S. efforts to support reformers in his backyard.

Most troubling, though, is that aside from some cosmetic changes, Syria continues to lend support to the Iraqi insurgency. Objectively, it would seem that Syria has run the U.S. table.

Despite the administration's rhetorical campaign against Syria, Washington is in no rush to up the ante with Damascus. Which is just fine with the Assads, who have been playing for time for three decades. The sad reality is that with just over 900 days to go and attention focused on Iran, Iraq, and Hamas, the clock is running out for the Bush administration's Syria policy. Of course, this is how Assad planned it. Hunkered down in Damascus, the Baathist regime intends to wait out yet another president. Regrettably, if the past five years are any guide, it will succeed.

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