

# Putting the Squeeze on Syria

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**R**eports from Syria indicate that President Bashar Assad is engaged in a systematic crackdown on his opposition.

The good news is that Syria may be feeling the pressure of U.S. efforts to promote reform in the world's last Baathist regime, including a promised \$5 million to pro-democracy groups.

The bad news is that the crackdown shows that despite U.S. efforts, Mr. Assad still feels confident enough to strong-arm his opponents.

Washington has been pursuing a policy of pressuring Damascus since 2002, when it became clear that Syria was helping Saddam Hussein in his looming fight with the United States. Initially, the Bush administration was stunned by Mr. Assad's audacity. When jihadis flowing into Iraq from Syria started to kill U.S. troops after the war began, the frustration turned to anger.

After senior Bush administration officials tried and failed several times to persuade Mr. Assad to curtail his support for the anti-U.S. insurgents, Washington implemented an incremental policy of pressure, starting with the signing of the 2003 Syria Accountability Act. But the policy kicked into high gear after the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a crime for which Syria is considered the leading suspect.

Since the Hariri killing, several key Syrian government figures have been designated as supporters of terrorism, among them Mr. Assad's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, the director of military intelligence.

On March 9, the Treasury Department implemented the final order for Patriot Act sanctions against the Central Bank of Syria, mandating that U.S. banks sever all correspondent accounts with the Syrian bank.

U.S. rhetoric on Syria also has been strong. In early April, for example, the administration condemned Syria for continuing to "interfere in the Lebanese political process and intimidate the Lebanese people."

Is the policy of financial sanctions and tough language working? The answer is mixed. While the pressure is clearly having some effect, there is little sign that it has succeeded in compelling the regime to change its behavior regarding Iraq, Lebanon and general support for terrorism.

Maintaining momentum to compel behavior change has proved a challenge. Initially, the process stalled because of some grudging Syrian cooperation in the fight against al-Qaida. Then the pressure eased when Washington and Damascus discussed security on the Iraqi border. In late 2005, additional measures were put on hold to avoid prejudicing the publication of the U.N. report on the investigation into the Hariri murder.

The Hariri investigation illustrates the momentum problem. Publication of the first U.N. report in October 2005 implicated Syria in the killing, turning up the heat. The second report, published in December, was more circumspect. (The same day the document was published, anti-Syrian Lebanese parliamentarian Gibran Tueni was assassinated in Beirut).

Lebanese politics since the withdrawal of Syrian troops last year also has buoyed the Assad regime. In the beginning, the Cedar Revolution gave rise to hopes that the Lebanese finally would work together to rebuild their country's political system and evict the remaining vestiges of Syrian occupation. But petty infighting and parochial interests have interfered, with Syrian allies and agents reaping the benefit.

All of this is good news for Mr. Assad's regime. The Syrians believe time is on their side. If they can wait just two more years, President Bush will be counting his final days in office and Washington's surprising ally in the anti-Assad coalition -- French President Jacques Chirac -- will have been replaced. Mr. Assad hopes for more sympathetic U.S. and French administrations.

For Washington, now is the time for a full-court press. The pressure strategy is working but requires some additional international -- particularly European -- assistance. Only with a fully joint U.S.-European approach can a tough policy toward Syria have a chance of success. To get the Europeans on board, Washington will have to convince key European capitals that behavior change - and not regime change - is the true policy goal.

Given how much other pressing issues -- Iraq and Iran, to name just two -- will crowd out the trans-Atlantic agenda, this is the only way to gain European confidence about Washington's true intentions. So long as America does not sell out the potential for a home-grown democratic reform movement to emerge as a result of the pressure strategy, Washington should be open to European ideas on pressing Mr. Assad for changing his problematic behavior.

Regrettable as it may be, without the Europeans, the U.S. efforts to promote change in Syria will remain on the right course but not cross the finish line.

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