

# An Education 'Carrot' for Syria

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Articles & Testimony

In the days ahead, the Bush administration is expected to impose sanctions on Syria for supporting Palestinian terrorist groups, occupying Lebanon, and developing weapons of mass destruction. While sanctions will apply pressure to the Syrian regime, they could also have the unintended effect of domestically bolstering it. To prevent this from occurring, they should be employed as part of a broader policy that fosters a relationship with the Syrian people -- beyond Washington's official relations with Damascus.

Last year Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act. According to the legislation, the president (unless national security dictates otherwise) must prohibit the sale of goods to Syria that can be used for military purposes, and apply at least two other penalties. These penalties can include substantive acts like banning all US investment in and exports to Syria (other than food and medicine); or symbolic measures like reducing diplomatic ties and prohibiting Syrian air carriers from operating in the US.

Economic relations between Syria and the US are limited, diminishing the impact of sanctions. In 2002, Syria exported a mere \$148 million of goods to the US and imported \$274 million in American goods (41 percent of imports were agricultural and would continue despite sanctions). This made Syria the 93rd largest trading partner of the US. The US-Syrian economic relationship has long been weak: Syria was the 94th US trade partner in 1994 and the 106th in 1984.

In fact, a ban on US investments in Syria would probably have a greater negative bearing on US firms than on Syrian ones. For example, a potential victim is Occidental Petroleum, part of an international consortium preparing to negotiate a \$750 million gas field development contract with the Syrian government. Irrespective of US sanctions, such projects will continue, but with non-American companies winning the contracts.

Due to this weak US-Syrian relationship and the unilateral nature of the policy, sanctions will, in practice, amount to censure of the regime of President Bashar Assad. Such a public reprimand could be valuable. At a minimum, the high-level emphasis placed upon the issue of Lebanese sovereignty, for example, reflects a foreign policy goal consistent with American ideals.

To support other US policies in the region, however, policymakers must ensure the Syrian regime does not manipulate pressure from sanctions to reinforce anti-American feeling. Syria's Baath regime has historically used Pan-Arab rhetoric to create a public identity, and it regularly leverages external threats to justify its rule. If the regime is cast as the monolithic representative of Syria and sanctions are perceived as an affront to national pride, Syrians could rally around the flag against external provocations. Across the region there would be a further danger that sanctions will be portrayed as the latest evidence of US malice toward Arabs.

As Washington formulates a position on reforms for the years ahead in the context of its Greater Middle East Initiative, policymakers must look at Syria not just for its current defiance on issues such as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, but for its people, their future and their relationship with the US. To prevent the Syrian regime from using sanctions to its domestic advantage, the Bush administration should extend a "carrot" to the Syrian

people.

When President George W. Bush imposes sanctions, he should also introduce a Syrian-American Fellowship Initiative (SAFI). Under the initiative, 100 outstanding Syrian students working in the humanities, business and agriculture would receive fellowships to study at American colleges and universities for up to four years before returning home. In 2002-03, some 586,000 foreign nationals studied in the US, but only 642 of them were Syrians. This represented a 12.6 percent decrease in Syrian students when compared to 2001-2002.

Visas and funding are critical to SAFI's success. On visas, Washington must create a mechanism to expedite the processing of Syrian student visa applications. As for funding, Washington could directly award scholarships to Syrian students (since they would not represent the regime), much as it does through the Fulbright program, which funded six undergraduate Syrian students and three visiting scholars in 2003. Policymakers could also enlarge the existing Fulbright program as well as create new special scholarships like the two-year graduate fellowships available to Israeli-Arab students through the "Israeli-Arab Scholarship Program," which is administered by the US Embassy in Tel Aviv and Amideast.

In addition, Bush should call on major corporations like General Motors and IBM, as well as private foundations such as the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation, to sponsor exceptional Syrian students. Washington could offer tax breaks to major corporations for participating. The White House could build public support for programs like SAFI in a presidential address, explaining their role in enhancing international relations and security. Such a partnership could eventually expand to include more students and nationalities.

Deepening US-Syria relations by providing Syrians with greater educational opportunities would serve human development goals inside Syria and demonstrate Washington's interest in a shared future with the people of the region. The development of a SAFI, or similar programs, would also signal that sanctions do not target the Syrian people and advance the direct relationship between Syrians and Americans.

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