

# Sanctioning Syria: A Moment of Opportunity

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**S**ince March 8, 2004, Syria has witnessed an unprecedented series of riots by Kurds and protests by human rights activists and intellectuals. These developments set the stage for the Bush administration's imminent announcement about imposing sanctions in accordance with the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act.

### The Shortsighted Ophthalmologist

When President Bashar al-Asad took over from his father, Hafiz, in June 2000, many hoped he would usher in a period of reform. After all, Bashar knew more about the West than his father had, having trained in London as an ophthalmologist. Unfortunately, his rule has been a disappointment on every front:

**Rejectionism:** In addition to providing Hizballah with 220-millimeter rockets capable of threatening Israeli cities, Asad has developed a close relationship with the organization's secretary-general, Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah (whom Hafiz al-Asad kept at arm's length). Despite Asad's promise to Secretary of State Colin Powell during the latter's May 2003 visit to Damascus, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad continue to operate in Syria.

**Lebanon:** By insisting that Hizballah retain its arms, Asad has made the organization a destabilizing force in Lebanon. Although he has withdrawn nearly half of the 30,000 Syrian troops stationed in Lebanon, he has deployed the Syrian secret police there to maintain control over the increasingly restive population.

**Iraq:** On the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Syria sent night-vision goggles, antitank weapons, aircraft parts, and ammunition to Saddam Husayn's forces. As recently as September 2003, officials from the Defense and State Departments referred to a continuing flow of resistance volunteers across the Syrian border.

**Islamist terrorism:** As State Department coordinator for counterterrorism Cofer Black stated in May 2003, "We clearly don't have the full support of the Syrian government on the al-Qaeda problem. They have allowed al-Qaeda personnel to come in and virtually settle in Syria with their knowledge and their support."

**Economic and political reform:** After seemingly permitting limited expression of criticism aimed at the government, Asad cracked down on such activity in 2001 (e.g., in one incident that year, ten human rights activists were

imprisoned for attending civil society meetings). Moreover, despite talk of economic reform, Asad appointed Muhammad Naji Otri as prime minister in September 2003 -- a step backward rather than forward, given Otri's old-style Ba'athist ways.

Weapons of mass destruction (WMD): Besides maintaining hundreds of Scud missiles with chemical warheads, Asad has plowed ahead with plans to develop longer-range missiles and more toxic and persistent chemical weapons (e.g., VX nerve agent).

'With Our Lives, With Our Souls, We Sacrifice for You, O Bush.'

On March 8, 2004 -- the forty-first anniversary of the imposition of emergency rule in Syria -- twenty to thirty human rights activists mounted an extremely rare public protest in Damascus, which was quickly broken up by hundreds of police. At the same time, 7,000 individuals signed a petition to lift the emergency rule, and intellectuals published numerous calls for liberalization in the Arab press outside Syria.

Even more surprising were the subsequent public protests among Syria's 1.8 million Kurds. As Abdel Baqi Youssef, secretary of the Syrian Kurdish Yakiti Party, put it, "Syria's Kurds were heartened by the positive developments for the Kurds in Iraq with the signing of the new Iraqi constitution, which gives Kurds their rights and recognizes Kurdish as an official language." At a March 9 soccer match in Qamishli (located in the Kurdish region in northeastern Syria), fans of an ethnically Arab team began chanting pro-Saddam slogans. Some of the Kurdish team's fans responded with chants praising Iraqi Kurdish leaders and President George W. Bush. Imitating the Syrian slogan traditionally used to praise Asad, they chanted, "With our lives, with our souls, we sacrifice for you, O Bush." The Syrian government admits fifteen people were killed in the subsequent unrest, which led to the burning of several public buildings. Over the next few days, smaller demonstrations occurred in Damascus and several other cities, and police were deployed in large numbers. Since then, some sources have reported mass arrests of Syrian Kurds. On March 16, six or more people were shot dead in the northwestern cities of Aleppo and Afrin. In an unusual move, Damascus has created a commission of inquiry to investigate the causes of the initial riots.

#### Syria Accountability Act

Coincidentally, the unrest in Syria comes as the Bush administration faces a deadline set by the recent Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act for determining what penalties to impose on Damascus. The president is unlikely to use his authority to waive all such penalties on grounds of national security. At its core, the act would ban all exports to Syria that have potential military applications (i.e., "dual use" items). That includes communications equipment such as cellular phones, which Washington wants to exempt on the grounds that they encourage more people-to-people communication. The act also requires the administration to impose at least two out of six other possible sanctions. Two of these are symbolic: banning Syrian flights to the United States (of which there are none to begin with) and blocking transactions by U.S.-based entities owned by the Syrian government (there are few if any such entities in the United States). Two other sanctions are designed to signal diplomatic displeasure: reducing diplomatic contacts and restricting Syrian diplomats to a twenty-five-mile radius around Washington and New York. The remaining two sanctions are more economically substantive: blocking all exports to (but not imports from) Syria, other than those intended for humanitarian purposes, and blocking investment in Syria. Reports suggest that Washington is leaning toward two sanctions in particular (blocking transactions by Syrian-government-owned entities and banning exports to Syria) while debate continues about a third (banning investments in Syria, which would significantly affect two oil companies: Conoco Phillips and Deveon Energy).

It is not clear how much of an impact these additional restrictions would have. The direct economic impact of trade sanctions would be small: U.S. exports to Syria were \$269 million in 2002, with most dual-use items banned by previous actions (imports from Syria, which are not covered by the act, were \$112 million). Yet, Washington's

decision could affect the European Union (EU) debate about the Trade Cooperation Agreement (TCA) with Syria. The EU is Syria's main trading partner, accounting for \$3.5 billion of the country's \$6.5 billion in exports. Some EU countries are insisting that the TCA not be ratified until Syria takes action to limit its WMD. Hence, there is some transatlantic consensus on the view that normal trade relations with Syria require Damascus to act in a way that promotes rather than undermines regional stability.

## Conclusion

Recent developments show that Asad's government faces an unusually public degree of domestic discontent. The challenge for Washington is to use this discontent as leverage for encouraging fundamental changes in the regime's behavior. The disappointing reality is that carrots and sticks have not had much influence on Syrian policy; regional developments seem to be a much more important determinant of the regime's behavior. In particular, whenever the United States appears to suffer setbacks in Iraq, Asad is quick to take advantage, whereas when Iraqi developments go well for Washington, Damascus seems to bend somewhat in order to accommodate U.S. concerns. Similarly, Syria has reined in Hizballah only after Israel has taken military action (e.g., the October 2003 Israeli strike on a Palestinian terrorist training camp near Damascus). Perhaps a bolder approach would have some success. Such a strategy would entail imposing serious sanctions under the new Accountability Act, not a symbolic minimum. At the same time, the administration would have to spell out what Syria needs to do in order to have certain restrictions relaxed and for Washington to promote quiet Israeli-Syrian talks. The administration could also coordinate with the EU regarding the TCA; a unified Western position is more likely to succeed than Washington and Europe proceeding independently.

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