

Syria and the War on Terrorism (Part II):

Challenges for U.S. Policy

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Jan 24, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

With its longstanding support for terrorism, both pre- and post-September 11, Syria poses a unique challenge to U.S. antiterror strategy. Unlike Iran -- whose leaders orchestrate public chants of "Death to America, death to Israel" and thereby provide rhetorical context to their sponsorship of terrorism -- Damascus proclaims its desire for warm ties with the United States and its commitment to a "comprehensive" peace with Israel. Specifically, Syria has benefited from its role in the Arab-Israeli peace process and its suzerainty over Lebanon. These factors have for years combined to provide Syria with a measure of protection against U.S. (and Israeli) antiterror initiatives.

In the wake of September 11, however, the goal of compelling change in Syrian support for terrorism may become a higher U.S. priority than ever before, for the sake of both checking Syria's own sponsorship and also cutting off Iran's outlet to terrorist groups in Lebanon. It is therefore useful to examine the possible financial, diplomatic, and military steps that the United States might pursue toward that end. Only with creative and persistent effort can Washington compel Damascus to discard its use of terrorism-by-proxy. Any such effort must allow Syria to save face while jettisoning terrorism as a state policy and shutting down local terrorist groups. Additionally, any carrots and sticks that the United States and its allies use to motivate Syria should be applied in tandem and in gradations: small carrots for small gestures, large sticks for large infractions.

Economic Measures

On the surface, Syria appears to be particularly susceptible to economic pressure. Senior U.S. officials have confirmed that despite U.S. sanctions stemming from Syria's sponsorship of terrorism, Damascus has nevertheless requested U.S. aid to facilitate economic reforms. Such assistance would complement the relatively meager sum -- \$228 million -- that Syria currently receives in annual foreign assistance and private foreign investment from Japan, Italy, Germany, France, the European Union, and several Gulf states. Syria also has aspirations to follow Lebanon as the next to be awarded special trade status under a "Euro-Med" trade agreement.

Two key factors, however, make any U.S. efforts to halt such aid unlikely to induce Damascus to end its support for terrorism. First, it is not at all clear that Syria is truly committed to economic reform. The country's ruling elites --

centered among the Alawite sect and the senior military ranks -- are heavily vested in the current economic system of state-run monopolies; real economic reform would not only strip these elites of much of their wealth and power, but would also help the Christian and Sunni business class, their traditional opposition. Second, applying economic pressure to Syria would likely push it even further into the arms of Iraq. According to UN officials, Syrian trade with Iraq has tripled over the last six months, from \$300 million to \$922 million. Syria's illicit oil trade with Iraq best exemplifies the ever-warming relationship between the regimes of Bashar al-Asad and Saddam Husayn. The 150,000-barrel-per-day Syrian pipeline into which the illicit Iraqi oil is pumped earns each country around \$1.1 billion a year. Asad promised Secretary of State Colin Powell several times during their meeting in February 2001 that he would register the Iraqi oil under the UN's oil-for-food program; nevertheless, Syria has continued to pump the oil illicitly, undermining UN Security Council Resolution 1382 even as Syria assumed a seat on that council on January 1. In general, economic incentives such as debt forgiveness are more likely to appeal to the Syrian elites, and thus may be more effective than punitive measures in weaning Syria off of terrorism. Syria's foreign debt amounts to \$22 billion (including \$345.6 million owed to the United States), which exceeds its gross domestic product of \$16.5 billion (according to World Bank estimates). Thus, debt forgiveness would strengthen the Syrian economy (at least for a time) without requiring the economic reforms that the elites find so fearful.

Diplomatic Pressure

Over the years, Syria's national pride and its self-image as the defender of Arab interests have outlasted international pressure on the country to turn from its nefarious ways. Unlike Yasir Arafat, who responds to crises and pressure alike by jetting off to foreign capitals, Bashar al-Asad (like his father) shows little interest in traveling much farther than Cairo. In addition, as recent visits by Pope John Paul II and British prime minister Tony Blair attest, Asad has no compunction about embarrassing visiting dignitaries in order to score points in the ideological struggle against Israel and to burnish his Arab nationalist reputation in the region. Just this week, Syria's UN representative took the opportunity of his country's maiden appearance as a member of the Security Council to equate Israeli antiterror actions in Rafah with Al Qaeda's September 11 attacks on America.

Typical diplomatic measures will likely be ineffective in convincing Syria to renounce terrorism. The regime's involvement in terrorism and other criminal activity is already well known; publicizing it further is unlikely to make Damascus reconsider its policies, and may push the regime even further away from the West. Moreover, the U.S. embassy in Damascus is more valuable to Washington as its eyes and ears in Syria than it is to the Syrian government, so threatening to downsize or close it would hurt U.S. interests more than Syria's.

There are, however, useful steps that the United States could take. The U.S. government recently developed new policies regarding the issuance of visas to individuals from countries known to harbor terrorists; Washington could invoke these policies to close the consular section of the embassy in Damascus, forcing Syrians to travel to Beirut or elsewhere for consular services. Restricting travel to the United States by Syrian officials and their families might be an appropriate response to continued Syrian acquiescence in the regular use of the Damascus airport for transshipment of weapons from Iran to Hizballah, as well as in the airport's use by terrorists -- such as Imad Mughniyeh -- traveling to Tehran.

Often, the most important diplomatic measures are direct communications from president to president. So far, the most prominent message sent from Bush to Asad was an expression of thanks for Syrian statements of sympathy in the wake of September 11. To the Syrian ear, messages from other sources -- including pointed critiques of Syria's sponsorship of terrorism by officials from the National Security Council, the State Department, and the Department of Defense -- come across as simple background noise. If such messages are to resonate in Damascus, they must come directly from President Bush; he must inform Asad that groups like Hizballah and Hamas are, like Al Qaeda, legitimate targets in the war on terrorism, and that continued sponsorship of such groups will come at a steep price.

Military Options

While keen to be taken off the U.S. list of terrorism sponsors, Syria maintains that its support for anti-Israel terrorist groups is at the core of its national security interests, at least as perceived by Asad and the Ba'ath Party. In the past, only the credible threat of massive Turkish military action led Syria to address Turkey's demands regarding the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) -- never central to Syrian interests -- and to expel Abdullah Ocalan from its borders in 1998. Thus, the threat of force will have to be all the more credible if Syria is to abandon its support for Palestinian terrorist groups.

As a first step, Washington could build on past instances in which Syria's support for terrorist groups was countered with force. Hizballah has been relatively quiet since Israel responded to its July 1, 2001, katyusha attack by shelling a Syrian radar station in the village of Sarin Tahta. Three Syrians were wounded in that counterattack, and Damascus got the message that the United States is unlikely to restrain Israeli retaliation. Raising the ante would send a useful message. Especially salutary would be large-scale, joint U.S.-Israeli-Turkish military training operations focused on counterterrorism, such as bombing runs of mock terrorist camps.

In the event that a combination of economic, diplomatic, and symbolic military measures are ineffective in compelling Syria to end its support for terrorism, Washington could examine various options involving the use of military force against Syrian interests or against the terrorist groups themselves. While Hizballah and several Palestinian terrorist groups maintain offices throughout Damascus and the adjacent Yarmuk refugee camp, none of these present viable military targets. The offices are located in residential and commercial neighborhoods, which would suffer heavy collateral damage in any air strike or missile attack. There are, however, three clear military targets: the terrorist training camps in the Syrian-controlled Beka'a Valley; similar camps in Syria proper (e.g., one run by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command just south of Damascus); and the Syrian-Iraqi oil pipeline. Attacks on camps in the Beka'a could be coupled with a demand that Syria expel from that area all foreign personnel associated with terrorism -- Iranians, Armenians, Kurds, and so forth -- as well as a pledge to assist in the reconstruction of the region once it is terrorist-free. If further pressure were needed, camps in Syria itself -- the existence of which Syrian officials recently denied -- could be targeted. In the case of the oil pipeline -- a cash cow and true "center of gravity" interest to Damascus -- U.S. forces could target the pumping station on the Iraqi side of the border, which would be much more difficult to rebuild. Such an attack would punish Iraq for its blatant violations of UN sanctions, but would not inhibit Syria from continuing to pump from its own domestic wells.

Conclusion

Inducing Syria to abandon its support for terrorism through financial, diplomatic, or even military pressure will not be easy, even if such measures are coupled with face-saving gestures. Nevertheless, it is essential that the United States follow through on its declared policy of zero tolerance for state sponsorship of terrorism. U.S. officials have stated unequivocally that such sponsorship must end, and that the organizations supported by Syria are terrorist groups of "global reach." History shows that an even greater risk to U.S. interests will emerge if Washington fails to live up to its word; such a failure will ensure that future pleas to end terror become diplomatic background noise.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

[Read Part I of this two-part series. \(templateC05.php?CID=1473\)](#) ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

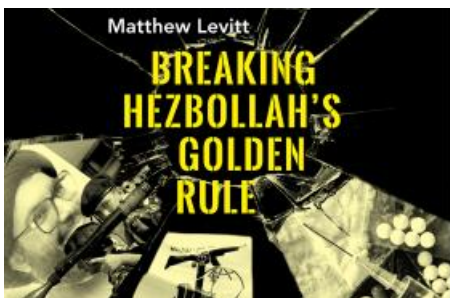
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

Terrorism [\(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

U.S. Policy [\(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)