

Syria's Accession to the UN Security Council and U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

The internal Bush administration debate over the "broad coalition/narrow target versus narrow coalition/broad target" in the war against terrorism will be put to a test Monday, when the United Nations General Assembly is scheduled to vote in secret ballot on the nomination of Syria as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Despite being a charter member of the U.S. government list of state sponsors of terrorism, Syria's candidacy has not yet elicited U.S. opposition.

Background

In the year since Bashar al-Asad inherited the Syrian presidency from his father, Damascus has worked hard to win support from Arab and Asian states to be one of two countries to represent the Asian regional grouping among the ten non-permanent members of the Security Council. Syria first won unanimous support from Arab countries and then the full endorsement of the China-influenced Asian group. If successful, Syria will succeed Tunisia in the seat traditionally reserved for an Arab state, formally replacing Bangladesh as an Asian representative. This would be Syria's third term on the Security Council, with both previous stints stunningly ill-starred -- during the first, in 1947-48, Syria participated in the pan-Arab attack after Israel's independence; and shortly following the second, in 1970-71, Syria joined in launching the surprise attack of October 1973.

Syria's victory this time around seems a foregone conclusion. Election to the Security Council is done by two-thirds vote in a General Assembly secret ballot, and the overwhelming majority of member-states have already pledged themselves to support Syria's candidacy. Importantly, the Bush administration opted long ago not to mount against Syria the sort of challenge Washington successfully mounted against Sudan's candidacy during the Clinton administration -- finding both an alternative candidate within the regional group and the votes to win. In March, the New York Times speculated that Syria's candidacy was on the agenda when Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus on his inaugural Middle East tour. It was also during that visit that Asad reportedly promised Powell to bring under UN mandate illegal Syrian exports of Iraqi oil, a commitment never fulfilled.

Given the virtual inevitability of Syria's accession to the Council, the issue for the Bush administration now is whether to voice publicly its support, opposition, or indifference to Damascus' membership on the body charged, according to the UN Charter, with "the maintenance of international peace and security." (Technically, there are no "no" votes in a Security Council election; countries can either vote for another candidate or cast a blank ballot.) Prior

to September 11, key issues that might have weighed heavily in U.S. deliberations are Syria's refusal to permit the Lebanese government to deploy troops to the Lebanon-Israel border, preventing the implementation of Security Council Resolution 425, and Syria's military deployments in Lebanon, in contravention of the Ta'if Accord. In addition, Syria's candidacy poses a unique problem of fairness -- after all, Syria is a country that hosts UN peacekeepers, while the country with which it is in a state of war and which also hosts UN peacekeepers (Israel) is barred by UN procedure from even applying to serve on the Council. (Israel was required to give up the right to apply when it accepted conditions for membership in the Western European and Others Group in 1999.)

The dominant issue surrounding Syria's candidacy is, however, terrorism. Indeed, the role of the Security Council itself in the fight against terrorism took on additional significance in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks when it unanimously approved, under the powers of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, a resolution (1373) empowering the Council "to take all necessary steps" to combat terrorist groups and their state sponsors.

Syrian Support for Terror

Syria has been a member of the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism since it was established, in 1979. According to the State Department's annual report, Patterns of Global Terrorism, Syrian government officials have not been personally involved in terrorist activities since 1986, when the then-head of Syrian Air Force intelligence was held responsible for masterminding the attempt to blow up an El Al airliner. Since then, Syria has continued to provide safe haven, training facilities, and political support to numerous radical Palestinian nationalist and Islamist terrorist organizations within Syrian territory and in Syrian-controlled portions of Lebanon. In addition, it has facilitated the shipment of weapons from Iran via Syrian air and land routes to Hizballah in Lebanon.

Contrary to general speculation, there is strong evidence that Syrian support for terrorist groups and their operations has actually increased in recent months, not decreased. While Hizballah itself has been relatively quiet since Israel inaugurated its policy of retaliating against Hizballah cross-border attacks with strikes against Syrian assets in Lebanon, there are clear signs of Syrian activity in the promotion of Palestinian terrorist organizations. For example:

- On October 3, Hizballah shelled Israel for the first time in three months and, disturbingly, cited the intifada -- not the goal of expelling Israel from Sheba'a Farms -- as the rationale for the action. This represents a worrisome change in Hizballah's public motivation for anti-Israel actions.
- On October 1, Palestinian Islamic Jihad -- an organization whose military leadership is based in Damascus -- took responsibility for a large car bomb in Jerusalem that was the first major violation of the Arafat-Peres ceasefire.
- On September 30, Israel's internal security agency, the Shin Bet, announced the arrest of twenty Hamas activists in the northern West Bank, all of whom were trained in Syria, Lebanon, or Iran and received orders to undertake terrorist actions via the Hamas office in Damascus. Some of those arrested were said to be involved in the Netanyahu suicide bombings of April and May 2001, in which eight were killed and more than 100 wounded.
- According to an indictment opened in Israeli military court two weeks ago, in August Israel intercepted two Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) operatives, trained in Damascus, who were planning to blow up the Twin Towers in Tel Aviv with a high-explosive car bomb.

If these and other reports are accurate, they suggest that Syria is not merely providing safe haven to "political offices" of terrorist groups but that the operational planning and strategic decisionmaking of these organizations is done in Damascus. Indeed, given the logistical, financial, political, military, media, and personnel support Syria provides to various terrorist organizations, a strong case can be made that Syria today violates virtually every paragraph of UN Security Council resolution 1373.

Syrian Position on Terrorism

Syria, of course, rejects the charge of complicity in terrorism. "We are against terrorism and we condemn it wherever it exists," said Syria's interior minister after signing an inter-Arab antiterrorism pact last year. "We distinguish between terrorism and people's struggle to restore their occupied lands and usurped rights," he said. More recently, President Asad himself wrote a condolence note to President Bush in the wake of the September 11 attacks, proposing "world-wide cooperation...to uproot terrorism in all its forms."

While Asad did not outline his ideas of "world-wide cooperation" in that letter, official Syrian media did expand on this theme. For example, on September 21, Radio Damascus urged Washington to add Israel to the list of state sponsors of terrorism, alleging that Israel could have been the perpetrator of the attacks on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon. This theme was also picked up by the most senior government-backed Muslim cleric, Grand Mufti Ahmad Kaftaro, who (according to independent press reports) delivered a sermon accusing Israel's Mossad secret service of being behind the attacks. Another early manifestation of Syria's conception of "world-wide cooperation" in antiterrorism was its hosting last week of a conference by the "Committee for the Support of the Intifada and Resistance to the Zionist Plan" to mark the first anniversary of the Palestinian uprising. Speaking alongside official Syrian government and Ba'ath party officials were such luminaries as Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, Islamic Jihad Secretary General Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, Hamas Political Bureau head Khalid Mishal, and PFLP-GC chief Ahmad Jibril.

Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

On September 20, President Bush declared that states "who continue" to sponsor terrorism will be viewed as "hostile" to the United States. In one bold gesture, the president both issued a clear warning to state sponsors of terror and an unprecedented offer to wipe the political slate clean should they immediately take substantive measures to end their active or passive support for terrorist groups. Since then, the Syrian government has issued generic statements condemning terrorism and, according to the Wall Street Journal, signaled that it may be willing to share information on the al-Qaeda network with Washington, should several political conditions be met. (Caveat emptor: An example of such previous anti-terrorist cooperation came in 1996, during the investigation of the al-Khobar Towers bombing. When the Clinton administration sought Syrian access to a material witness then in a Syrian jail, he mysteriously "hanged himself" before U.S. agents could interview him.) However, there is no evidence in the public domain of Syria taking any steps to curtail its own support for terrorism -- in fact, quite the opposite.

Conclusion

Prior to the events of September 11, U.S. officials of both the Bush and Clinton administrations evinced no interest in fighting Syria's UN Security Council candidacy, despite having ample grounds on which to wage the fight. While there were surely compelling foreign policy interests cited by those arguing against a showdown, the result was that the United States ignominiously decided to punt, blurring the clarity of any U.S. message about terrorism. That battle is already lost, and a country deemed by five successive U.S. presidents to be a state sponsor of terrorism will take a seat on the Security Council. In the post-September world, the Bush administration faces a new decision: whether to support, oppose, or abstain on the Security Council vote and whether to break with the past pattern and make its vote public. As the first public test of translating the principles about state sponsors of terrorism enunciated by the president on September 20 into practical policy, the implications of this vote will reverberate for some time to come.

Robert Satloff is the executive director of The Washington Institute. Natan Sachs, an intern at the Institute, assisted in the preparation of this PolicyWatch.

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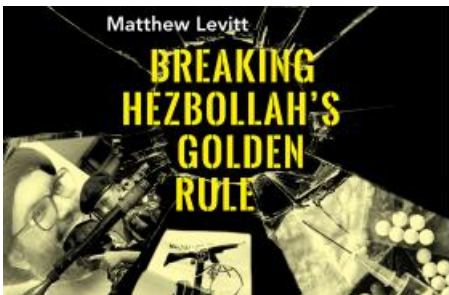
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