

Congressional Testimony

Syrian Sponsorship of Global Terrorism: The Need for Accountability

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As the Bush administration surveys its options for year two of the war on terrorism, scant attention is focused on Syria—despite the fact that Dr. Bashar al-Assad's regime has been among the world's most active supporters of terrorism, even after September 11. In fact, Syrian support for terrorism under Bashar al Assad has become far more brazen and direct than it was under the rule of his father, Hafez al Assad. Over the past year, the President and other senior officials have warned Damascus to terminate its proactive sponsorship of international terrorist groups of global reach, extended face-saving opportunities for Syria to do so, and warned that Syria that it must close down terrorist training camps, expel terrorist organizations, and "choose the right side in the war on terror." Failure to hold Syria accountable for its support of international terrorism after repeatedly articulating this message will further dilute America's already diminished credibility in the eyes of men like Bashar al Assad, Yasir Arafat, and Saddam Hussein. Bashar is waiting to see if the United States will actually act on all its talk, or if in fact it's all just kalam fadi, empty words.

Background

Syria is a charter member of the State Department's state sponsors of terrorism list, subject to relevant bilateral economic sanctions, but is the only Middle Eastern state sponsor subject to congressionally imposed state-sponsorship sanctions only.¹ However, efforts to convince or compel Syria to renounce terrorism, in both word and deed, have historically been of lower priority than encouraging Syrian moderation in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Indeed, successive U.S. administrations have seemed to act on the supposition that the path to ending Syrian support for terrorism is via a Syria-Israel peace treaty. Since the prospects for Syrian-Israeli peace receded after the failed Clinton-Assad summit of March 2000, neither goal—ending Syrian terrorism or pursuing Syrian-Israeli peace—has been a high priority for the United States.

After the al Qaeda attacks in September 2001, the Bush administration focused once again on the role of state sponsors, but with a twist. The wording of President Bush's September 20, 2001, declaration—"From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime"—implicitly offered state sponsors a virtual amnesty for previous actions, should they jettison the terrorist option and join fully in the campaign to stamp out terror.² This message was reinforced vis-a-vis the Syrian case when the United States did not oppose Syria's election to the world's most elite security club—the United Nations Security Council—one week later.

Positive Measures?

Since September 11, Syria has undertaken limited and measured but positive steps in the war on terrorism. Syrian authorities reportedly arrested four Syrian nationals and an unspecified number of foreigners allegedly affiliated with al Qaeda in the village of Deir a-Zor (as reported in a November 23, 2001, communique of the Syrian Human Rights Organization).³ The Syrians also reportedly allowed an FBI agent to visit Aleppo and question individuals who knew September 11 mastermind Muhammad Atta in the mid-1990s (although reported in numerous press stories, knowledge of the visit was denied by Syrian officials who also denied any official cooperation between Syria and the FBI).⁴ Syria has shared intelligence with U.S. agencies on people and organizations linked to al Qaeda, especially Syrian-born German citizen and senior al Qaeda commander Mohammad Heidar Zammar.⁵ U.S. officials, however, have not been granted direct access to Zammar, and have no way of knowing if the Syrians are passing along everything Zammar tells them or just information that suits their interests. For example, the Syrians are unlikely to share information pertaining to Syrian nationals or other terrorist groups enjoying Syrian support. In fact, German law enforcement authorities investigating the Hamburg cell maintain they have yet to receive any information from the interrogations of Zammar.⁶

The New York Times cited unnamed U.S. officials as stating that a senior CIA official held secret discussions with a Syrian counterpart relating to al Qaeda.⁷ While unconfirmed, it is suspected that some of the intelligence cooperation centered on Mamoun Darkazanli, the fugitive Syrian businessman who appears to have served as a key financial conduit between Atta's Hamburg cell and al Qaeda.⁸ In the weeks leading up to Syria's election to the Security Council, reports suggested a slowdown in the flow of arms from Tehran to Damascus, transhipped under Syrian military escort to Hizballah in Lebanon. ⁹ Sources indicate this apparent slowdown was short lived.

Most critically, Syria has provided actionable intelligence from interrogations of al Qaeda operatives held in Syria—most likely Zammar—that led to the disruption of at least one terrorist attack against U.S. military forces in the Gulf.¹⁰

Business As Usual

The significance of these measures notwithstanding, the most important theme of Syria's policy on terrorism since September 11 has been "business as usual." In fact, no country has rejected the Bush administration's outreach approach as dismissively as has Syria. For example, in his June 24, 2002, speech demanding Palestinian reform President Bush also called on Syria to "choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organizations."¹¹ The al-Liwaa newspaper ran an interview with Bashar al-Assad a week later, in which the Syrian President asserted that Palestinian suicide bombings were simply acts of "despair" caused by "Israel's barbaric practices against an unarmed people," and reasserted that "Syria supports the Lebanese national resistance, including Hizballah."¹²

Harboring Terrorists, Promoting Terror

According to the State Department, seven of the twenty-eight terrorist groups cited in Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000 receive some level of sponsorship and support from Syria, and a number of "Specially Designated Terrorists," such as senior Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzook and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leader Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, coordinate terrorist activities and reside in Damascus (together with other leaders of terrorist organizations not yet listed as Specially Designated Terrorists).¹³ From these headquarters, the groups and leaders incite, recruit, train, coordinate, and direct terrorism. Indeed, since September 11, no fewer than five Damascus-based organizations—PIJ, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and Hizballah—have undertaken operations, from suicide bombings to assassinations, resulting in the deaths of dozens of civilians and an Israeli cabinet minister.

Syrian officials actively support these groups' activities—despite protestations that Palestinian groups maintain solely "political offices" in Damascus—as evidenced in the May 21, 2001, meeting between DFLP head Nayef Hawatmeh and Syrian Defense Minister Gen. Mustafa Tlas. According to a DFLP official, "the talks covered ways of supporting the Palestinian uprising and resistance in occupied Palestine against the Zionist aggressions."¹⁴ In another example, former Hamas military commander Salah Shehada himself acknowledged the central role played by these "political" leaders in acts of terrorism. Shehada asserted that "the political apparatus is sovereign over the military apparatus, and a decision of the political [echelon] takes precedence over the decision of the military [echelon], without intervening in military operations."¹⁵

While it is far from certain the talks would have amounted to anything, the fact is that the "political," Damascus-based leaders of Palestinian rejectionist groups like Hamas and PIJ torpedoed talks between the Palestinian Authority and various Palestinian factions in August on the terms of a proposed ceasefire. The "outside" leadership in Damascus pressured the groups' "inside" leaders not to accede to any deal that proscribed suicide and other terrorist attacks. Syrian officials themselves urged Hamas and PIJ not to cease operations but to step up attacks as well. In May, Damascus reportedly offered Hamas direct Syrian financial aid if it renewed suicide bombers.¹⁶

Syria's hosting these group's leaders, providing them with some semblance of political cover, and facilitating their financing and operational planning frustrates U.S. efforts to deescalate Israeli-Palestinian violence, establish calm and initiate reform within the Palestinian Authority.

Sponsoring, Training and Arming Terrorists

If any trends can be discerned, evidence suggests that Syrian efforts to promote terrorism have expanded under Bashar al-Assad's rule. Since Bashar took office, Israeli authorities have uncovered more than twenty Hamas activists who were recruited in various Arab countries and sent to Syria for terrorist training.¹⁷ The recruits received weapons training, as well as lessons in the preparation of explosives, intelligence activities, hostage taking, and suicide operations.

Last week, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage identified Hizballah as "the A team of terrorism," and warned that "their time will come, there's no question about it."¹⁸ In fact, there is no dealing with Hizballah without first dealing with Syria. According to press reports, Syria has actually integrated elements of Hizballah's military units into the Syrian army in Lebanon and, in a sharp break from the caution exercised by his father, Bashar al Assad has started supplying Hizballah with heavy arms itself (on top of Iranian arms transshipped via Damascus), including a new 220 mm rocket.¹⁹

Additionally, since Assad inherited the presidency from his father, there is strong evidence that the Syrian-backed Hizballah has moved energetically into the Palestinian arena—both by sending its own operatives to attempt terrorism inside Israel, as in the case of Jihad "Gerard" Shuman, arrested in January 2001,²⁰ and by establishing links with terrorist groups in the West Bank, Gaza, and among Israeli Arabs. For example, Hizballah operatives working with Force 17 colonel Masoud Ayad in Gaza reportedly directed small arms and mortar attacks against Israeli civilians in Gaza.²¹ In June 2002, Israeli authorities conducting a search in Hebron arrested a Hizballah operative who had entered the country on a Canadian passport.²² The arrest of this individual coincided with the discovery in Hebron of mines previously only used by Hizballah in Lebanon.²³ Hizballah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp are more active in Lebanon than ever, including recruiting, training, and dispatching a cell of Palestinians which killed 7 Israelis in a cross-border raid on the northern Israeli community of Metsuba in March 2002.²⁴ Hizballah has also engaged in a proactive effort to recruit Israeli-Arabs to provide intelligence on

Israel and logistical support for terrorist operations. Israeli authorities have broken several cells of Israeli-Arabs associated with Hizballah and other "Lebanese groups," including a four-person cell suspected of passing "computer programs, maps, various objects and documents which may constitute intelligence" through the village of Ghajjar (which straddles the Blue Line separating Israel and Lebanon) to groups in Lebanon in exchange for drugs and weapons.²⁵ Similarly, a Hizballah operative recruited a terrorist cell of Israeli Arabs from the Galilee village of Abu Snan, which was uncovered by Israeli authorities as the group was planning kidnapping operations that would have targeted Israeli soldiers.²⁶ In July 2002, Israeli authorities arrested Hussein Ali al-Khatib and Hatem Ahmad al-Khatib, two Syrians from the Golan who, on top of smuggling weapons and drugs, were spying on Israel and passing classified information to Hizballah contacts.²⁷ In fact, Hizballah operatives are known to have gone to Europe, where they picked up false identification and travel documents and continue on to Israel, the West Bank and Gaza to train and assist Palestinian terrorist groups.

The Israeli navy's seizure of the Karine-A weapons boat—in which Hizballah played a central role, according to evidence that State Department spokesman Richard Boucher called "compelling"—is not the only example of weapons smuggling tied to Syria and its proxies. In December 2001, for example, Jordan's State Security Court tried three Islamists accused of smuggling weapons secured from Syria to the West Bank to be used in attacks on Israelis.²⁸ Two other defendants remain at large, including Abd al-Muti Abu Miliq; Abu Miliq is a Palestinian with Syrian travel documents who was sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor in absentia in the September 2000 trial of twenty-eight Islamists plotting terrorist attacks at the turn of the millennium.²⁹ In June 2000, Israel arrested a Lebanese citizen traveling from Syria to the West Bank via the Allenby Bridge as he attempted to smuggle weapons—including katyusha rockets—in his vehicle.³⁰ In January 2002, an Israeli court unsealed indictments against five Druze residents of the Golan who were caught smuggling Claymore roadside bombs and hand grenades across the Syrian-Israeli border. The weapons, bearing operating instructions for achieving maximum casualties and damage to "people and vehicles," were to be delivered to the West Bank.³¹

In February 2002, Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres told a press conference outside the UN in New York that with Syria's blessing Hizballah had deployed 10,000 rockets capable of penetrating well into Israel to southern Lebanon.³² The Christian Science Monitor reported in February that "well informed sources" referred to "truck[load] after truckload" of weapons that arrived in southern Lebanon from May 2000 to December 2001.³³

Hizballah also remains a direct threat to U.S. interests. According to senior U.S. officials, Sheikh Nasrallah and Imad Mugniyeh are known to be working together in planning terror attacks globally and across the United Nations certified Blue Line separating Israel and Lebanon. Hizballah operatives continue to surveil US interests (among others) and plan attacks. Hizballah cells are active not only in the Middle East, but in East and Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, South and Central America, and, as the case against Mohammad and Chawki Hammoud in North Carolina recently highlighted, the United States.

Hizballah is not the only terrorist group of global reach to enjoy the fruits of Syrian state sponsorship. Just five days after Syria assumed the rotating presidency of the U.N. Security Council, Damascus-based PIJ leader Ramadan Abdullah Shallah claimed responsibility for the June 5, 2002, suicide bus bombing at the Megiddo junction in northern Israel that killed 17 people and wounded over 40 more.³⁴ In interviews with al Jazeera and other media outlets, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres stated that Shallah in fact ordered the Megiddo attack from his Damascus headquarters.³⁵ In fact, Shallah and other PIJ leaders in Damascus maintained close contact with a number of PIJ operatives on the ground in the West Bank. One such operative was Tarek Az Aldin, a senior PIJ operative from the Jenin area, who served as a coordinator for several PIJ terrorist cells in the West Bank as well as "the link to the movement's central headquarters in Syria."³⁶ Another Damascus-West Bank link was Taabat Mardawi, a senior PIJ operative responsible for the death of 20 people and injury of 150 others, who "was instructed and operated by the PIJ headquarters in Syria, with which he was in contact."³⁷

Documents seized by Israel indicate that Ramadan Shallah himself transfers funds from Damascus to the personal bank accounts of individual PIJ terrorists such as Bassam al Saadi, an operative responsible for PIJ finances in Jenin.³⁸ In one case, Shallah sent Saadi \$127,000 to "aid the families of those killed or arrested," but the funds somehow "disappeared." This, and another case in which \$31,000 failed to reach Ali Safuri, have created significant internal rifts with the organization over charges of internal corruption.³⁹

Beyond harboring PIJ leaders who order, plan and finance terror attacks, Syria actively promotes PIJ terrorism by facilitating terrorist training by its proxies on its soil. Through the interrogations of Nasser Aweiss and other senior al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and PIJ operatives, Israeli authorities learned that members of al Aqsa, PIJ and other Palestinian groups have been undergoing terrorist training in Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command (PFLP-GC) camps south of Damascus. Traveling through Jordan, the Palestinian trainees are met at the Jordanian-Syrian border by Syrian officials who check their names against a pre-approved list and escort them to camps run by Ahmed Jibril's PFLP-GC. Iranian-funded PFLP-GC instructors train the Palestinians in terrorist tactics, while Syrian officials remain on the sidelines assuring the trainees are properly cared for. Ziad Nafa, a former PFLP-GC member, told a Jordanian court in February that one of the thirteen suspects on trial for plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in Amman asked him to arrange terrorist training for the group in Syria.⁴⁰ Aware of this and other similar training camps, Senator Bob Graham, Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence announced in July 2002 that the "training camps that have developed particularly in Syria and Lebanon where the next generation of terrorists are being prepared" pose an even greater risk to the United States than Iraq.⁴¹

Beyond Hizballah, Hamas and PIJ, Syria supports the most radical elements in Lebanon's lawless Palestinian refugee camps and encourages their engagement in anti-Israeli terrorism. For example, both the Return Brigades (Kata'ed al Awda), an amalgam of secular and Islamist Palestinian groups dominated by Fatah radicals from

Nablus, Jenin and Tulkarm, and al-Nathir (the Harbinger) another radical Fatah offshoot, have been linked to renegade Fatah Colonel Munir al Maqdash (Abu Hassan), who is closely linked to Syria and Iran.⁴² The Return Brigades has taken credit for several shootings such the February 19, 2002, ambush that killed six IDF soldiers and the February 27, 2002, murder of an Israeli in the Atarot industrial zone of Jerusalem.⁴³ In August 2002, the Return Brigades reportedly tried to assassinate the head of PA General Intelligence in a roadside shooting attack between Nablus and Jenin near Tubas.⁴⁴ Al Maqdash, whose headquarters is in the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon, was sentenced to death in absentia by a Jordanian court in 2001, and is also wanted by Lebanese authorities.⁴⁵ PA officials believe Al Maqdash was behind a Return Brigades leaflet distributed in Nablus and Jenin in August 2002 announcing that several Israeli leaders were on its "hit list."⁴⁶ According to a mainstream Fatah official, al Maqdash "has very good ties with Syria and Iran. These countries pay him millions of dollars. He is using the money to undermine the local Fatah leadership and establish his own bases of power here."⁴⁷ According to press reports, Iran has traditionally funded Palestinian dissident groups in the Lebanese refugee camps, including al Maqdash, through the Institute of the Palestinian Martyrs.⁴⁸ This is confirmed by Israeli authorities, who discovered al Maqdash's link to terrorist elements in the West Bank when they arrested Nasser Aweis and Jamal Ahwal. Al Maqdash apparently sent Aweis between \$40,000 and \$50,000 for weapons, expenses and bomb-making materials, and Aweis reported back to al Maqdash by telephone on the success of his attacks.⁴⁹ Ahwal reportedly received an average of \$5,000 a week from al Maqdash for similar purposes.⁵⁰ Al Maqdash also funded Ahmed Abu Hamidan (abu Fahdi), a Colonel in the PA's National Security Organization who manufactured explosives and supplied, funded and directed terrorists to carry out attacks.⁵¹

Syria's proactive state sponsorship of terrorism carries over into Syrian-dominated Lebanon as well. As of August 2002, Iran was reported to have financed and established terrorist training camps in the Syrian-controlled Beka'a Valley to train Hizballah, Hamas, PIJ and PFLP-GC terrorists to use rockets such as the short range Fajr-5 missile and the SA-7 anti-aircraft rocket.⁵² The camps, including one in Khuraj near the Syrian border, were reported to be under the command of Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) General Ali Reza Tamzar, commander of IRGC activity in the Beka'a Valley.⁵³ According to a "Western intelligence agency" report, which puts the cost of the Iranian program at \$50 million, Tamzar's IRGC detachment also trains the Lebanese and Palestinian terrorists to carry out "underwater suicide operations."⁵⁴ The Iranian terrorist training program was the result of a secret meeting held in the Tehran suburb of Darjah on June 1, 2002, in advance of a two-day conference in support of the Palestinian Intifada held in Tehran on June 1-2, 2002.⁵⁵

Furthermore, the terrorist activity facilitated by Syria in Lebanon is not limited to Hizballah and the motley crew of Palestinian terrorist groups operating freely in Lebanon. Recently, al Qaeda terrorists reportedly have been taking advantage of the lack of central rule, nests of terrorism like the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp, and the willing assistance of sympathetic groups to provide al Qaeda members shelter and support.⁵⁶ Some 150-200 al Qaeda operatives have reportedly found refuge in the Ayn al Hilweh refugee camp, and bin Laden's son and wife are said to have come and gone from Syria several times since September 2001.⁵⁷ According to American and European intelligence officials cited in The Washington Post, Hizballah is "increasingly teaming up with al Qaeda on logistics and training for terrorist operations."⁵⁸ The alliance is described as "ad hoc," "tactical," and "informal," involving mid-and low-level operatives.⁵⁹ American and European intelligence officials cited in the Post reiterated this concern just last week, noting "the most worrisome" of al Qaeda's new "tactical, ad-hoc alliances" is with Hizballah.⁶⁰ Acknowledging that the cooperation between these Sunni and Shi'a groups marks a shift from their "years of rivalry," the intelligence officials said al Qaeda and Hizballah have in fact "recently cooperated on explosives and tactics training, money laundering, weapons smuggling and acquiring forged documents."⁶¹

Additionally, Lebanon's willingness to harbor armed terrorist groups and militias and its tolerance of their activities comes at a cost to its own internal security. Fighting between various Islamist, Palestinian and Lebanese factions—including Hamas, Asbat al Ansar, and a collection of groups affiliated with or breakaways from Fatah—has turned the Ayn al-Hiweh refugee camp near Sidon into a battleground where children play with spent bullet cartridges and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) casings.⁶² Some of the radical Islamists resisting arrest are reported to be al Qaeda insurgents who found refuge in the Ayn al Hilweh refugee camp.⁶³ Hizballah and the Shi'ite Amal militia have engaged in firefights in south Lebanon as they vie for influence over villages in the unpoliced south.⁶⁴

Convinced his group will be shielded from the war on terrorism, Hizballah's Nasrallah publicly boasted that "Lebanon doesn't put pressure on us, it tries to defend us."⁶⁵ Nonetheless, the State Department refrained from listing Lebanon as a state sponsor of terrorism or even taking Lebanon to task in Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001. In fact, Patterns qualifies Lebanese support for Palestinian terrorist groups, noting the legitimate legal status they enjoy in Beirut.

It should be noted that Beirut is governed vicariously through Damascus, and to date the United States has satisfied itself with vicariously covering the issue of Lebanese sponsorship of terrorism under Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. Similar technical considerations prevented the State Department from designating the Taliban's Afghanistan as a state sponsor of terrorism, despite its now universally recognized role in serving as the premier breeding, planning and training ground for international terrorism. In the wake of September 11, Lebanese support for Syrian proxy terrorist groups—in the form of safe-haven, training camps and more—needs to be revisited.

A review of Syrian activity post-September 11 provides compelling evidence that the Assad regime remains an active sponsor of international terrorism, operating on many fronts and via many organizations. Indeed, of the seven state sponsors on the State Department's list, Syria rivals Iran for conducting the most frenetic activity in support of terrorism. Syria cooperates closely with fellow state sponsor Iran in its support of Hizballah and Palestinian terrorist groups. While the Syrians have offered some assistance in terms of intelligence on al Qaeda,

Syria has apparently decided to reject out of hand President Bush's offer of amnesty vis-a-vis the anti-Israel terrorism most central to Syria's regional policy. Moreover, Syria's continued development of chemical weapons, coupled with its sponsorship of international terrorism, makes it an overly qualified candidate for inclusion in the "axis of evil."⁶⁶

Challenges for U.S. Policy

With its longstanding support for terrorism, both pre- and post-September 11, Syria poses a unique challenge to U.S. antiterror strategy, especially as Damascus continues to sponsor terrorism despite President Bush's June 24, 2002, demand that Syria "choose the right side in the war on terror."⁶⁷ 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 must become a higher U.S. priority than ever before, in order to check Syria's own sponsorship and cut off Iran's outlet to terrorist groups in Lebanon. Only with creative and persistent effort can Washington compel Damascus to discard its use of terrorism-by-proxy. Any such effort must incorporate measures to allow Syria to save face while demanding it jettison terrorism as a state policy and shut down local terrorist groups. Having said that, Syrian must be held accountable for any continued double-dealing, i.e. providing some measure of cooperation in the war on al Qaeda while fanning the flames of other terrorist groups of global reach. As the United States considers what carrots and sticks to apply in its effort to motivate Syria, it should consider the need to apply inducements and consequences in tandem and in gradations: small carrots for small gestures, large sticks for large infractions.

The Syria Accountability Act represents a long overdue effort to hold Syria accountable for its sponsorship of terrorism, its development of chemical weapons, its illegal smuggling of \$1.1 billion in illicit Iraqi oil in violation of UN resolutions, its procurement of military hardware and spare parts for the Iraqi military, and its ongoing occupation of Lebanon.¹ In fact, despite this activity Syria remains the only State Sponsor of terrorism not subject to trade or investment bans, nor are Syrian diplomats subject to the same travel restrictions as diplomats from other states listed as sponsoring terrorism.

President Bush and a host of other senior officials have threatened to take Syria to task for its continued belligerent behavior, but have yet to follow through. The result is that American warnings and threats are not heard by the likes of Bashar al Assad, Yasir Arafat and even Saddam Hussein. Our inaction has caused us to diminish and devalue to power of our word, be it from the Oval Office, Foggy Bottom or the Hill. We have become background noise. Already, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al Sharaa boasts that "nobody can call Syria to account."⁶⁸ He is wrong: we can, and we should.

In tandem with other economic, diplomatic and even military measures, the Syria Accountability Act would go a long way toward coaxing Damascus to shed its support for terrorist groups and fully engage in the war on terrorism and the quest for peace in the Middle East.⁶⁹

The administration should build on the President's June 24, 2002, speech and deliver a clear cut message to senior Syrian officials—presumably in private—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. In the event Syria fails to respond to the President's message, the administration should follow through with punitive measures.

Addressing Critics

Critics of the Syria Accountability Act articulate four basic arguments, each of which is flawed:

1. Curtailing the administration's margin of maneuverability

Senior administration officials have already articulated their concern that the Syria Accountability Act would deny them the flexibility necessary to conduct foreign policy and undermine its policy options related to Syria, Lebanon, and, by the message the Act would send, the larger Arab and world. In fact, the Act is an actionable manifestation of the President's own warning that those who sponsor terror will "be held accountable."

In a Thanksgiving speech delivered to army troops last November, President Bush said: "We fight the terrorists, and we fight all of those who give them aid. America has a message for the nations of the world: If you harbor a terrorist, you are a terrorist. If you feed a terrorist or fund a terrorist, you are a terrorist, and you will be held accountable by the United States and our friends" [emphasis added].⁷⁰

In his speech to the United Nations that same month, the President asserted: "In this world, there are good causes and bad causes, and we may disagree on where the line is drawn. Yet, there is no such thing as a good terrorist. No national aspiration, no remembered wrong can ever justify the deliberate murder of the innocent. Any government that rejects this principle, trying to pick and choose its terrorist friends, will know the consequences" [emphasis added].⁷¹

More recently, President Bush called on June 24 for Syria to close terrorist training camps and expel terrorist organizations. Assad is now waiting to see how much weight the President's spoken word carries.

Moreover, the "margin of maneuverability" some officials are concerned may be curtailed is in fact undermining the war on terror by sending Assad and others the clear message that sponsoring certain terrorist groups may be tolerated in return for some level of cooperation against other groups. Syria believes it can leverage cooperation related to the interrogation of Mohammed Zammar for American indifference related to its continued terrorist activities. In this vein, Bashar al Assad publicly threatened that "if they [America] continue to call Syria a terrorist nation, I will talk about it," referring to the intelligence cooperation targeting al Qaeda that the U.S. purportedly wanted kept secret.⁷²

Finally, the Syria Accountability Act incorporates a presidential "national security interest" waiver clause and, indicating its respect for the administration's need for flexibility, only requires the government to select two of the five most sensitive proposed sanctions.

2. Pushing Syria into Iraq's arms

Syria is already running fast and hard into Iraq's arms. Initiatives like the Syria Accountability Act are necessary to establish consequences for just this kind of behavior. The Act would force Syria to reassess its strategic decision to side with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, against U.S. efforts to liberate the average Iraqi from Saddam's oppressive, tyrannical regime. On the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks, Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi Transportation Ministers met in Beirut to discuss "tripartite transportation cooperation."⁷³ Such cooperation would enable Syria to enhance the existing illicit oil trade and illegal arms procurement programs between Syria and Iraq and lead to further violations of United Nations Security Resolutions (even as Syria sits on the UN Security Council). The arms Syria has procured for Iraq include refurbished T-55 tank engines, anti-aircraft cannon, MiG 29 engines, spare parts for MiG 21s, 23s and 25s, military trucks, and radar systems.⁷⁴

Just as in the war on terrorism, Syria needs to "choose the right side" when it comes to Iraq. Left to its own volition, it will either avoid making a decision (entrenching the unacceptable status quo) or make decisions that are inimical to the average Iraqi suffering under Saddam Hussein and to U.S. interests.

3. Undermining Syrian reform

Some apologists have even voiced concern that holding Syria accountable for its blatant support of international terrorism might discourage the "reformist tendencies" of Syria's "youthful" president. In fact, despite Bashar's promising and optimistic inauguration speech in June 2000, the youthful president has demonstrated an uncanny ability to avoid rocking the boat of Syrian elites. Early measures taken to liberalize the banking industry and crack down on corruption have fizzled. Today, there is no real evidence of what was at its height slow and almost imperceptible reform. While some civilians have been jailed on corruption charges, the most seriously corrupt element of Syrian society, the Syrian military, has been left untouched. The recent closure of the Lebanese MTV television station is just the most recent manifestation of the Syrian crack down on Lebanese society.

Bashar has surrounded himself by an old guard comprised of his father's loyalists, and only broken from his father's mold by shedding his father's caution and becoming more directly involved in terrorism (such as directly supplying Hizballah with weapons from Syrian stockpiles and establishing a close, personal bond with Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah).

And there has been no reform when it comes to Syrian support for terrorism. When a suicide bomber murdered 15 at a pool hall outside Tel Aviv, Syria's state-controlled radio lauded "the wonderful and special suicide attacks" as a "practical declaration before the whole world of the way to liberate Arab Palestinian land." Just two days before the September 11 attacks, Syria's state-appointed grand mufti, Ahmad Kaftaro, described "the heroic suicide operations" as "a natural and legitimate reaction that must be blessed in so far as we reject the Zionist crimes against our people of Palestine."⁷⁵ Damascus openly flaunts its support for terrorism, and is hardly engaged in either domestic or foreign policy reform.

4. We can't do everything at once

Finally, senior members of the administration warn that the United States has multiple, sometimes competing, foreign policy and national security interests and that they can not all be pursued with equal vigor at once. Attempting to do so, the theory goes, would undermine them all. In fact, each of these critical interests feeds into the next, and failure to deal with any one will undermine our ability to deal with the others. The administration must think strategically about all its goals and understand how they impact one another. The world does not operate in a linear fashion, and events do not occur in simple consecutive order. The consequences of failing to understand this are daunting.

For example, when U.S. Ambassador to Beirut Vincent Battle told the Beirut Daily Star that Hizballah attacks against Israeli positions on the Israeli side of the UN demarcated Blue Line did "not fall within the rubric" of international terrorism, he inadvertently legitimized the activities of the most professional terrorist group of global reach on the State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) and sent contradicting messages not only to Hizballah, but to every other terrorist group, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, the Palestinian Authority and all the states the administration is courting in the war on terror and the liberation of Iraq. The Ambassador's remarks stand in stark contrast to Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's warning that the United States will eventually take Hizballah to task for its terrorist actions.

In another case, senior leaders of the Jordanian Islamic Action Front, an Islamist party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, met with Ambassador Christopher Ross in July. Just two weeks later, the day after a

Hamas bombing at Jerusalem's Hebrew University killed seven civilians, including five Americans, the IAF sponsored a mass rally in support of Hamas and the "Jenin martyrs" at which IAF leaders proudly lauded the university bombing as a "bold, heroic operation." Addressing the rally, the group's Secretary General, Hamza Mansour, highlighted the Islamic Action Front's commitment to supporting Hamas and asserted that the Hebrew University attack cost \$50,000, which "this necessitates giving large financial aid to the Palestinian people to carry out more operations of this kind." Mansour further urged the Jordanian people and Arab nation "to contribute generously to the Palestinian people so that they could buy the weapons and necessary equipment for confronting the Israeli arrogance."

In the matrix of foreign policy goals, we must deploy the talent at our disposal to address U.S. national interests in a comprehensive fashion. The war on terrorism, liberating Iraq, deescalating Israeli-Palestinian violence, reinvigorating the Middle East peace process, and bolstering America's perception in the Middle East are all critical action items on the American foreign policy agenda, and can not be addressed one at a time. We have a formidable bureaucracy capable of multitasking.

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.

Endnotes

1 Syria's illicit oil trade with Iraq best exemplifies the ever-warming relationship between the regimes of Bashar al-Assad and Saddam Hussein. 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. Assad reportedly 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, 2002.

1 Iran, Iraq, Libya and Sudan are all subject to additional sanctions such as the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), the Helms-Burton Act, the Cuban Democracy Act, the Trade Sanctions and Export Enhancement Act, the Trading with the Enemy Act, the Arms Export Control Act, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, and more. For a complete listing of the U.S. Treasury Department's sanctions programs and country summaries, see <https://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/sanctions/index.html>

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