

Is Syria Ready for Peace?

For decades, Syria has been a force for instability in the region. Damascus' continued support for terrorism, cooperation with Iran, ongoing interference in Lebanon and support for insurgents in Iraq have harmed American interests and cost the lives of numerous U.S. military personnel. As Syria works to end its international isolation, Damascus must take concrete steps to demonstrate its readiness for peace and stability in the Middle East.

Damascus: A Terrorist Hub in the Region

Syria has been a charter member of the U.S. list of designated state sponsors of terrorism since its inception in 1979. Syria supports the terrorist groups Hizballah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, among others, and allows their external leaderships to operate in Damascus. In April 2003, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Damascus to seek Syrian cooperation on anti-terrorism efforts. While Powell secured a Syrian commitment to close the Damascus offices of Palestinian terrorist organizations, Syrian President Bashar Assad reneged on his word and the offices remain open.

In addition, U.S. and Iraqi officials are charging that Syria continues to allow terrorists to cross into Iraq to carry out major attacks against American troops and Iraqi civilians.



Syrian President Bashar Assad must take serious steps to demonstrate he is interested in peace with Israel.

Syria Helps Hizballah Rearm After War

Hizballah, a key Syrian client, has killed more Americans than any terrorist group other than al-Qaeda. Its core principles, spelled out in its 2009 platform, pledge allegiance to Iran's supreme leader, call for the destruction of Israel and declare that Hizballah's "determination to fight the U.S. is solid."

During Hizballah's war against Israel in the summer of 2006, Hizballah fired more than 4,000 Syrian- and Iranian-supplied rockets into Israel, killing more than 40 and wounding more than 2,000. Syria continues to help Hizballah rearm, both directly and by permitting the shipment of Iranian arms through its territory in violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 war.

In 2009 and 2010, Syria increased tensions in the region further with the transfer of more advanced and longer-range weaponry such as M-600 missiles and Scud rocket launchers. Hizballah now has more than 42,000 rockets – nearly three times as many as it had prior to the war.

Syria Destabilizes Lebanon

Syria has constantly meddled in Lebanese affairs for decades. It occupied Lebanon for 30 years under the guise of “providing stability” during and after the Lebanese civil war. Damascus is suspected in a string of assassinations of leading anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians and journalists, including the 2005 killing of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

In response to these assassinations, a mass Lebanese movement, known as the Cedar Revolution, galvanized international pressure against the Syrian presence. In response, Syria formally withdrew its troops from Lebanon in late 2005. In August 2008, Syria and Lebanon finally began diplomatic talks to normalize relations, and exchanged ambassadors for the first time early this year. This marks an important milestone, as Syria traditionally has refused to recognize Lebanese sovereignty—believing that Lebanon is simply part of Greater Syria. While this new diplomatic activity has been welcomed and has led to the thawing of Syria’s international isolation, many policymakers and Lebanese politicians remain suspicious of Syria’s motives.

Syria Pursues Secret Nuclear Program

An investigation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) provides strong evidence that Syria also has been pursuing capabilities that could be employed in a nuclear weapons program. The IAEA concluded in a November 2008 report that there is strong reason to believe Syria was nearing completion of a nuclear reactor before Israel destroyed it in September 2007. The IAEA found a “significant” number of processed uranium particles in the soil at the site and said the features of the building resembled those of a nuclear reactor. A subsequent IAEA report highlighted the discovery of additional uranium particles at a reactor facility in Damascus. With Syria already maintaining the largest stockpile of biological and chemical weapons in the Arab world, an illicit Syrian nuclear weapons program raises serious concerns.

Damascus’ cooperation with Iran has run counter to U.S. interests.

U.S. Takes Action to Sanction Syria

In 2003, Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, imposing diplomatic and economic sanctions on Syria for violating Lebanese sovereignty and for backing terrorist groups in Iraq. Under the law, the president was required to implement at least two of six

sanctions provided for in the legislation. President George W. Bush implemented sanctions banning all exports to Syria except food and medicine and barring Syrian aircraft from landing in or flying over the United States.

Is Syria Ready for Peace?

Syria has felt the sting of international isolation, but it is not yet clear how far it is willing to go towards finding peaceful solutions with Israel and in Lebanon.

Syria has taken some steps that hint it may be ready to change course. In November 2007, Syria sent a delegation to the Annapolis peace conference in Maryland, and Israel and Syria also conducted indirect negotiations under Turkish mediation during 2007 and 2008.

While the Obama administration has renewed sanctions imposed under the Syria Accountability Act, it also has sought to improve relations between Washington and Damascus. President Obama said he would nominate career diplomat Robert Ford to become the United States' first ambassador to Damascus since 2005. In addition, a series of high-level visits to Syria have focused on persuading Syria to clamp down on the influx into Iraq of foreign fighters who have directly contributed to the instability of the new Iraqi government and the deaths of American soldiers. In August of 2009, a delegation from CENTCOM established a tentative protocol with Syria on the security of Iraqi-Syrian border posts. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visited Damascus to seal the tripartite deal, only to return to a series of truck bombings claimed

by al-Qaeda and again traced to terrorists entering Iraq via Syria. Baghdad recalled its ambassador and demanded that Syria expel the militants. Damascus immediately responded by recalling their own ambassador, effectively ending the U.S. initiative before it began.

If Syria wishes to emerge from its international isolation, Damascus must commit to peace and reject terrorism and extremism. For talks between Israel and Syria to succeed, Damascus must be ready to take steps to demonstrate that it is a serious partner for peace, including:

- closing down the Syrian offices of Palestinian terrorist groups
- ending support for the terrorist group Hizballah and for Palestinian terrorist groups
- distancing itself from the radical Islamist leadership in Iran
- answering questions about its illicit nuclear activity
- halting its destabilizing actions in Lebanon and allowing the Lebanese government to exercise sovereignty
- reducing Syria's massive military presence near its border with the Golan to create an environment that facilitates peace
- stopping the flow of terrorists from Syria to Iraq