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Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Syrian Politics and External Relations

- Internal Situation

- Foreign Affairs

Syrian-U.S. Bilateral Issues

- Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations

- Syrian and Israeli Roles in Lebanon

- Relations with Iraq

 - Trade Trends

 - Operation Iraqi Freedom

 - Escapees and Border Crossings

 - Oil from Iraq

 - Military Equipment to Iraq

- Arms Proliferation

 - Chemical and Biological

 - Nuclear

 - Missiles

 - Advanced Conventional Weapons

- Terrorist Activity

 - Reaction to Terrorist Attacks on the United States

 - Secretary Powell's Visit

U.S. Aid and Sanctions

- General Sanctions Applicable to Syria

- Specific Sanctions against Syria

- Recent Congressional Action

 - The Syrian Accountability Acts

 - Other Legislation

Alternatives and Implications

Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues

SUMMARY

Syria, governed by President Hafiz al-Asad from 1970 until his death in June 2000, is a prominent player in the Middle East scene. Within the region, a number of border disputes, problems of resource allocation, and political rivalries have caused frequent tensions between Syria and its neighbors. In particular, the Syrian Golan Heights territory, which Israel has occupied since 1967, has been one of the most intractable issues in the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Syria participated in U.S.-sponsored bilateral peace talks with Israel between 1991 and 1996, when talks were suspended. A few months after the election of Israeli Labor Party leader Ehud Barak as Prime Minister of Israel, Syrian-Israeli talks resumed briefly under U.S. auspices in December 1999 and January 2000 but stalled again as the two sides disagreed over the sequence of issues to be discussed. A March 26, 2000 meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, between then Presidents Clinton and Hafiz al-Asad failed to produce an agreement on restarting the talks. Asad's successor and son, President Bashar al-Asad, has expressed support for the peace process but has not been willing to make concessions on territorial issues.

An array of bilateral issues continue to affect relations between the United States and Syria: the course of Arab-Israeli talks; questions of arms proliferation; Syrian connections with terrorist activity; Syria's role in Lebanon; and Syria's opposition to the U.S. occupation in Iraq. A variety of U.S. legislative provisions and executive directives prohibit direct aid to Syria and restrict bilateral trade relations between the two countries, due largely to Syria's designation by the U.S. State Department as a sponsor of international terrorism. Syria has reportedly cooperated

with the United States in investigating Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks but has been unwilling to sever connections with some other terrorist organizations. During a visit to Damascus on May 3, 2003, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell warned Syria to withdraw support from terrorist organizations and has repeated the warning since then.

Bills introduced in the House (H.R. 4483) and in the Senate (S. 2215) in April 2002, each entitled the Syria Accountability Act, would have imposed further U.S. sanctions against Syria unless it halts support for international terrorism and takes other specified actions. The 107th Congress adjourned without floor action on either bill. Largely similar bills, H.R. 1828 and S. 982, were introduced on April 12, and May 1, 2003, respectively. The House Committee on International Relations reported H.R. 1828 favorably on October 8, 2003. After Operation Iraqi Freedom began in March 2003, senior U.S. officials warned Syria to stop permitting transit of military supplies and volunteer fighters through Syria to Iraq. Syria denies these allegations.

An issue for U.S. policy makers is the degree to which the Administration should go in seeking to enlist Syrian support for U.S. endeavors in the Middle East. Many U.S. observers believe removal of legislative sanctions should be contingent on Syrian support for the Arab-Israeli peace process and a clear renunciation by Syria of terrorism, programs to develop mass destruction weapons, and other policies injurious to U.S. interests. Others favor quiet diplomacy aimed at encouraging Syria to play a constructive and responsible role in the Middle East.



MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

On October 8, 2003, the House International Relations Committee reported the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (H.R. 1828) favorably to the full House by a roll call vote of 33 to 2. This bill would impose additional economic and trade sanctions on Syria. There are reports that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold a hearing on the Senate version of the Syria Accountability Act (S. 982) later in October.

On October 6, 2003, Israeli fighter aircraft struck what Israeli spokesmen described as a Palestinian training camp about 10 miles northwest of Damascus. According to Israeli officials, the camp was operated by the radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which had claimed responsibility for bombing a restaurant in Israel the previous day, killing at least 19 people. Syrian officials denied that the target was a training camp and introduced a draft resolution condemning the Israel action in the U.N. Security Council. President Bush told Israeli Prime Minister Sharon "that Israel's got the right to defend herself, that Israel must not feel constrained in defending the homeland." U.S. officials cautioned both sides against escalation but reiterated previous warnings to Syria to cease support for terrorism and other activities at variance with U.S. interests.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Although U.S.-Syrian relations improved somewhat in the 1990s, further strains appeared after the breakdown in Syrian-Israeli negotiations in 2000 and Syria's opposition to a U.S. military campaign in Iraq. Members of Congress have periodically introduced legislation to tighten U.S. sanctions against Syria or to condition relaxation of existing restrictions on further changes in Syrian policy. Recent U.S. Administrations, though not inclined to lift sanctions on Syria at this time, tend to believe it is in U.S. interests to encourage Syria to play a positive role in the Arab-Israeli peace process and support other U.S. initiatives. The issue for U.S. policy makers is the degree to which the United States should work for better relations with Syria in an effort to enlist Syrian cooperation on regional and international issues such as the war on terrorism.

Syrian Politics and External Relations

Internal Situation. The death of Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad in June 2000 removed one of the longest serving heads of state in the Middle East and a key figure in the affairs of the region. A former air force commander and Minister of Defense, the late president exercised uncontested authority for almost 30 years through his personal prestige and his control of the principal pillars of the regime: the ruling Ba'ath Party, the armed forces, and the intelligence apparatus. President Bashar al-Asad, who succeeded his father in a smooth transfer of power, has pursued some political reforms, but many observers believe he remains circumscribed by power elites who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Observers have described President Bashar al-Asad's modernization program as akin to the Chinese model, with emphasis on economic reform while retaining one-party rule.

In his inaugural address in July 2000, the new president called for “steady, yet gradual steps toward introducing economic changes” and “removing bureaucratic obstacles to the flow of domestic and foreign investments.”

Syria in Brief

Population (July 2003):	17,585,814 (Growth rate: 2.45%)*
Area:	185,180 sq km (71,498 sq mi), slightly larger than North Dakota
Ethnic Groups:	Arabs 90.3%; Kurds, Armenians, others: 9.7%
Religious Sects:	Sunni Muslim 74%; Alawite, Drize, Ismaili 16%; Jewish (less than 0.01%)
Literacy (2003):	76.9% (male 89.7%, female 64.0%)
GDP:	
External Public Debt (2002):	\$22 billion, including up to \$12 billion to Russia (inherited from Syria's debt to former Soviet Union)
Inflation (2002):	0.9%
Unemployment (2002):	20%

*In addition, approximately 20,000 Arabs and 20,000 Israeli settlers live in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights territory (2003 estimate)

Source: CIA World Factbook 2003; Economist Intelligence Unit (London)

Foreign Affairs. Syria's relations with its neighbors have been marred in the past by border problems (with Turkey and Israel), disputes over water sharing (with Turkey and Iraq), and political differences (sometimes with Jordan and — until recently — with Iraq, which was governed by a rival wing of the Ba'th Party); Iraq, in particular, resented Syrian support for Iran during the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-1988 and Syrian support for the allied coalition that expelled Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. Syrian relations with all three neighbors improved, however, in the late 1990s. In 2003, Syria opposed the U.S.-led campaign to overthrow the regime of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Syrian-U.S. Bilateral Issues

Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations

Syrian-Israeli negotiations remain deadlocked over Syria's demand that Israel withdraw unconditionally from the Golan Heights, a 450-square mile portion of southwestern Syria that Israel occupied during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The late President Asad said he accepted the principle of “full withdrawal for full peace” and would establish peaceful, normal relations with Israel in return for Israeli's withdrawal from Golan (and from southern Lebanon as well). Israeli governments have differed over the question of withdrawal, but all have demanded a prior Syrian commitment to establish full diplomatic relations and agree to security arrangements before any withdrawal takes place.

Also, Syria and Israel disagree over what would constitute full withdrawal, because of slightly differing boundary lines defined in the past. Israel regards the boundary as the

international border established in 1923 between what was then the British-controlled territory of Palestine and the French-controlled territory of Syria, while Syria believes it should be the line where Syrian and Israeli forces were deployed on the eve of the June 1967 war. Among other things, the latter boundary line would confer both symbolic and geographic benefits on Syria by giving it access to the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Kinneret or Lake Tiberias).

After a hiatus of almost 4 years, teams headed by then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shar'a held two rounds of talks in Washington and West Virginia in December 1999 and January 2000, respectively, at the invitation of then President Clinton. Further talks failed to materialize, however, as the parties disagreed over the sequence of discussions. Syria wanted to address border issues before dealing with other topics, while Israel wanted to concentrate first on security, water, and future bilateral relations. A meeting in Geneva between then Presidents Clinton and Hafiz al-Asad in March 2000 produced no agreement; Israeli territorial proposals conveyed by Clinton were unacceptable to Asad, who insisted on full Israeli withdrawal to the June 1967 border. In his inaugural address in July 2000, President Bashar al-Asad stated that "we are in a hurry to achieve peace, but we are not prepared to relinquish territory and we do not allow our sovereignty to be encroached upon." Other Syrian officials have reiterated this position.

At an Arab summit conference on March 27-28, 2002, Syria joined other Arab states in endorsing a peace initiative by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah involving full Israeli withdrawal from Arab territories occupied since 1967 in return for normal relations with Israel in the context of a comprehensive peace. President Asad described the initiative as a "first step" and said "what is required is a mechanism" to implement the plan. He also demanded that Israel commit itself publicly to returning occupied Arab lands and maintained that "for us, terrorism comes from Israel." Meanwhile, Syria abstained on U.N. Security Council Resolution 1397 (March 12, 2002) and boycotted the vote on a follow-on resolution (Resolution 1402, March 30), both calling for cessation of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Syria objected to the resolutions on grounds that they did not meet Arab concerns and did not condemn Israeli attacks on Palestinians. Later, on March 27, 2003, President Asad criticized current and previous U.S. peace plans, saying that all of them are "destined for failure because they do not meet the aspirations and restore the rights of the Palestinian people." In a subsequent interview published on May 11, 2003, Asad said any peace talks with Israel should be based on earlier U.N. resolutions, the 1991 Madrid conference, and the March 2002 Saudi peace plan.

Meanwhile, an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan known as the "Road Map" was put forward by the "Quartet" (the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia) and made public on April 30, 2003. The Road Map includes a Syrian-Israeli peace settlement as one of the goals it is designed to achieve. In an interview with a Kuwaiti newspaper on May 25, however, President Asad commented that the Road Map was directed at Israeli-Palestinian issues and added that "Syria and Lebanon are mentioned only in passing." On June 5, a spokeswoman for Asad subsequently dismissed the Road Map as "a Palestinian-Israeli affair." Nonetheless, on August 1, the State Department published the text of an interview Secretary Powell gave to an Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv*, in which he emphasized that "the President's vision includes a comprehensive settlement that deals with the issues of interest to Syria and to Lebanon." The Secretary went on to say, however, that the Syrians did not seem ready yet for negotiations.

On October 6, 2003, Israeli fighter aircraft struck what Israeli spokesmen described as a Palestinian training camp about 10 miles northwest of Damascus, reportedly the first time Israeli aircraft had struck deeply into Israel in 26 years. According to Israeli officials, the camp was operated by the radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which had claimed responsibility for bombing a restaurant in Israel the previous day, killing at least 19 people. Syrian officials denied that the target was a training camp and introduced a draft resolution condemning the Israel action in the U.N. Security Council. President Bush told Israeli Prime Minister Sharon “that Israel’s got the right to defend herself, that Israel must not feel constrained in defending the homeland.” U.S. officials cautioned both sides against escalation but reiterated previous U.S. warnings to Syria to cease support for terrorism and other activities at variance with U.S. interests. (“Israeli Airstrike Hits Site in Syria,” *Washington Post*, October 6, 2003; “Bush Tells Israel It Has the Right to Defend Itself,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2003.)

Syrian and Israeli Roles in Lebanon

Syrian Army units moved into large parts of northeastern and central Lebanon shortly after civil strife began in that country in 1975. Syrian forces have remained there since 1976, ostensibly under an Arab League peace-keeping mandate. Meanwhile, Israel occupied a portion of Lebanon between 1982 and 1985 in an operation designed to root out armed Palestinian guerrillas from southern Lebanon. From 1985 until May 2000, Israel maintained a 9-mile wide security zone in southern Lebanon, enforced by Israeli military patrols and an Israeli-funded Lebanese militia called the Army of South Lebanon (ASL). At an Arab League sponsored meeting at Taif, Saudi Arabia in October 1989, the Lebanese Parliament agreed on a revised formula for power sharing within the Lebanese government; the Parliament also adopted a plan for reestablishment of central Lebanese authority and phased redeployment of Syrian forces to the eastern Biqa’ (Bekaa) Valley within two years of the agreement’s implementation. At that time, Lebanon and Syria were to agree on the ultimate status of Syrian forces in eastern Lebanon. As of 2003, however, Syrian forces have not yet fully redeployed, although their numbers appear to have diminished (see below).

U.S. Administrations and Members of Congress have expressed the view that Syrian forces should have redeployed in accordance with the Taif Agreement by 1992, and have also criticized Syrian toleration of the presence of the pro-Iranian Hizballah militia in southern Lebanon. Syrian officials and pro-Syrian Lebanese have countered that not all conditions of the Taif Agreement have been met so far, and that the Lebanese armed forces are not yet capable of maintaining internal security. Syrian and Lebanese leaders have also argued that Syrian forces should remain in Lebanon as long as Israel maintained its security zone in southern Lebanon, and that Hizballah activity constituted legitimate resistance activity in southern Lebanon as long as Israeli forces were present.

On May 24, 2000, however, Israel unilaterally withdrew its forces from the security zone in southern Lebanon. On June 7, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright noted that Israel had fulfilled its obligations by withdrawing from Lebanon and said “I think that the Syrians should do so also.” Lebanon and Syria claim that a complete Israeli withdrawal should have included a small enclave at the eastern end of the Israeli security zone called “the Shib’a (Chebaa) Farms,” which they assert is part of Lebanon but Israel considers part of the Golan Heights. (For further information, see CRS Report RL31078, *The Shib’a Farms Dispute and its Implications*, August 7, 2001, by Alfred B. Prados.) The Shib’a Farms enclave remains a source of tension, as Israeli forces periodically target Hizballah, as well

as Syrian, positions in retaliation for Hizballah raids on Israeli forces in the Shib'a Farms area. (For further information on the Syrian role in Lebanon, see CRS Issue Brief IB89118, *Lebanon*, by Clyde R. Mark.) More recently, in the July 2003 *Ma'ariv* interview, Secretary Powell urged Syria to encourage Lebanon to deploy its armed forces into southern Lebanon, which Hizballah units continue to use as a staging area for attacks against Israeli targets.

As noted above, Syria's troop presence in Lebanon seems to have been reduced in recent years. Since mid-2001, Syria has reportedly carried out troop redeployments or withdrawals in June 2001, April 2002, February 2003, and July 2003. According to news reports, in some cases troops were redeployed to more distant parts of Lebanon and in others troops were withdrawn all the way to Syria. As a result of these troop movements, analysts estimate that Syria's troop presence, which averaged between 25,000 and 35,000 for some years, has dropped to approximately 15,000 since the latest withdrawal. Lebanese and Syrian sources described the troop movements as phases in implementing the 1989 Ta'if agreement, but other analysts have speculated that these movements were designed to mollify Lebanese Christian opponents of Syria's presence in Lebanon, win favor with the United States (which welcomed the troop withdrawals), avoid provoking Israel, and deal with potential unrest on the Syrian-Iraqi border as the likelihood of a U.S.-led campaign against Iraq increased. In a possibly related development, Lebanese sources in January 2003 indicated that the Syrian regime has urged Hizballah to reduce attacks on Israeli targets.

Relations with Iraq

Trade Trends. Syria's relations with its erstwhile adversary Iraq began to improve in the late 1990s, as the two countries established diplomatic relations, though not at the ambassadorial level, and expanded trade relations. According to news reports, bilateral trade increased from \$500 million in 2000 to \$1 billion in 2001, and estimates range from \$1 billion to \$3 billion in 2002. Bilateral trade largely ended in early 2003 as U.S. forces mounted Operation Iraqi Freedom and Syria reportedly closed border crossings to Iraq in April 2003 under U.S. pressure. (See below.) According to news reports in the summer of 2003, however, the United States has not objected to the resumption of Syrian trade with Iraq in the post-war period, and the head of the federation of Syrian chambers of commerce estimated that bilateral trade in early August at an annual equivalent of between \$100 million and \$200 million, still only a fraction of reported pre-war levels. ("Syria Resumes Trade with Iraq Unhindered by U.S. Regional Ties," *London Financial Times*, August 6, 2003.) Syrian exports to Iraq reportedly include food, plastics, generators, refrigerators, and formerly banned items such as satellite dishes. Syrian business people hope to gain some contracts for the reconstruction of Iraq; however, in his *Ma'ariv* interview published on August 1, Secretary of State Powell predicted that Syria would have to improve its relationship with the United States and with the interim Iraqi authorities if it wants to play a role in rebuilding Iraq.

Operation Iraqi Freedom. As the United States began to move toward confrontation with Iraq, Syria expressed opposition to the use of military force against Iraq and called for lifting economic sanctions, while urging Iraq to comply with pertinent U.N. Security Council resolutions. In an interview published on June 18, 2002, President Bashar al-Asad warned that any military attack on Iraq would be a mistake and said "[n]o country in the world has the right to change the system [of government] in another country." On November 8, 2002, however, Syria joined the other members of the U.N. Security Council in voting for

Resolution 1441, which cited Iraq as remaining in “material breach” of its obligations and mandated an enhanced weapons inspection regime in Iraq, despite widespread predictions that Syria would vote against or abstain on the resolution. A Syrian official told Reuters news agency on November 9 that Syria voted for the resolution “with the aim of saving Iraq from a military strike and safeguarding its (Iraq’s) interest.” On November 13, the Syrian Foreign Minister took the position that Resolution 1441 did not automatically authorize an attack on Iraq and said Syria would not participate in any strike against Iraq “outside the framework of the United Nations.” Subsequently, Syria worked with like-minded members of the Security Council to avert passage of a second resolution that would authorize use of force against Iraq.

After the United States and its allies launched Operation Iraqi Freedom on March 19, 2003, Syria became a leading critic of the U.S.-led campaign against Iraq. On March 30, Syrian Foreign Minister Shar’at told the Syrian parliament that “Syria has a national interest in the expulsion of the invaders from Iraq.” These and similar Syrian statements drew strong criticism from senior U.S. officials, who accused Syria of facilitating shipments of military equipment to Iraq (see below) and of allowing volunteer fighters from other Arab countries to transit Syria on their way to Iraq to join in the defense of Saddam Hussein’s regime. After the conclusion of Operation Iraqi Freedom, in an interview on May 25, President Asad drew a distinction between Syria’s stand on the former regime of Saddam Hussein and on the country of Iraq. Asad maintained that “we are not with Saddam” but called for “the unity of Iraqi territory, withdrawal of the foreign occupation forces as soon as possible, ... freedom of the Iraqi people to determine their future, and preservation of the funds and resources belonging to the Iraqi people.”

Escapees and Border Crossings. As the regime of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein began to collapse, there were reports that Syria had provided safe haven to Saddam himself and other high-level Iraqi officials fleeing from the U.S.-led coalition. In late April, U.S. officials credited Syrian leaders with helping seal the border with Iraq, and two visiting Members of Congress said President Bashar al-Asad had promised to expel high-ranking Iraqis seeking refuge in Syria. During his visit to Syria on May 5 (see below), Secretary Powell said he had given Syria the names of Iraqis suspected to have fled to Syria but added that he thought the Syrian President “has no interest in serving as a haven for any of these individuals.” In an interview with *Washington Post* journalist Lally Weymouth published on May 11, 2003, President Asad said Iraqi officials who approached the Syrian border had been turned back, except for some who had come to Syria before Operation Iraqi Freedom began. He said Syria also permitted entry by female relatives and children of would-be escapees.

On June 18, during an attack on an Iraqi convoy that U.S. officials suspected of carrying former Iraqi officials seeking to escape, U.S. forces captured five Syrian border guards in the vicinity of the Iraqi-Syrian border. U.S. forces released the Syrians on June 30, despite what an unidentified U.S. military official called circumstantial evidence that the Syrians were helping Iraqis escape. On June 30, Secretary Rumsfeld said the role of the Syrian border guards remained unclear. On July 14, the commander of a Syrian border post near Iraq told *New York Times* reporters that U.S. helicopters and planes routinely enter Syrian air space and frequently fire across the border into Syria. The officer said Syrian forces had not returned the fire.

Some U.S. officials continue to charge that Syria is allowing pro-Saddam volunteers from various Arab countries including Syria itself to cross its border into Iraq, where they are joining other groups attacking U.S. forces. In a press briefing on August 19, 2003, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the Administration does not think Syria has effectively closed its borders with Iraq. In early September 2003, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told reporters that the largest groups of fighters captured by allied forces in Iraq were from Syria and Lebanon. (“Senior U.S. Official to Level Weapons Charges Against Syria,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2003.¹) In testimony before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia on September 16 (see below), Under Secretary of State John R. Bolton stated that “Syria permitted volunteers to pass into Iraq to attack and kill our service members during the war, and is still doing so.” On the other hand, local U.S. commanders reportedly have occasionally encouraged contacts in the form of low-level trade between Syrians and Iraqis in the border area as a means of relieving economic pressures on Iraqi tribesmen in the border area. (“101st Airborne Scores Success in Northern Iraq,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2003.)

Oil from Iraq. Between November 2000 and March 2003, there were reports that Iraq was shipping between 120,000 and 200,000 barrels of oil per day through a recently reopened 550-mile pipeline through Syria; some estimates were as high as 230,000. Analysts believe Syria was buying Iraqi oil for domestic use at a discount of \$2 or \$3 per barrel and selling its own oil at international market prices. According to a *Los Angeles Times* article of January 29, 2002, Syria may have been earning \$50 million or more per month from these oil transactions; while a *Washington Post* article of May 12, 2003 estimated even higher profits, ranging from \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion per year. Syrian and Iraqi officials maintained that the pipeline was only being tested for future use, implying that they did not regard the shipments as violations of relevant U.N. export sanctions against Iraq. In February 2001, President Asad told visiting Secretary Powell that Syria would handle future oil shipments from Iraq in accordance with the U.N. oil-for-food program; however, there is no evidence that Syria fulfilled this commitment. Commenting on Syria’s unfulfilled pledge on the eve of his May 2003 visit to Damascus, Secretary Powell remarked that “I will always have that in my background software and on my hard drive.” (“Powell to Detail Concerns to Syria”, *Washington Post*, May 3, 2003.) In any case, a Kuwaiti newspaper reported that U.S. forces blew up the pipeline from Iraq through Syria in late March 2003, after Operation Iraqi Freedom began.

Military Equipment to Iraq. During 2002 there were reports that Syria had become a conduit for shipments of military equipment from eastern European countries to Iraq. Alleged suppliers include Ukraine, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Serbia. In late April 2002, three recent Iraqi military defectors told a British newspaper (*The Guardian*, April 29, 2002) that the first of three arms consignments bound for Iraq had arrived in the Syrian port of Latakia on February 23, 2002. The defectors said the shipment came from the Czech Republic and contained anti-aircraft missiles, rockets, and guidance systems for SCUD surface-to-surface missiles. According to an article by one of Israel’s

¹ U.S. military officials were quoted in October 2003 as saying about 220 foreign fighters from Syria and Saudi Arabia are in custody. “Enemy Is ‘More Lethal,’ U.S. General Says,” *Washington Post*, October 3, 2003.

foremost military journalists in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* on July 15, 2002, Syria was facilitating the transshipment to Iraq of Russian-made jet engines and refurbished tank engines, Czech anti-aircraft guns, radar, and engines bought from the Ukraine for Russian-manufactured MiG-29 fighter aircraft and other equipment from Hungary and Serbia. A leading U.S. defense expert told a congressional committee on July 31, 2002, that deliveries of military equipment to Iraq through Syria had “become significant since mid-2001,” mainly consisting of spare parts and weapons assemblies for MiG and Sukhoy combat aircraft, for armored equipment, and for ground-based air defense weapons. He commented that so far these shipments have probably had “only a limited impact on the overall readiness of Iraqi forces.”

U.S. officials issued fresh warnings to Syria over its alleged involvement in resupply of Iraqi military forces after Operation Iraqi Freedom began. On March 28, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told reporters that “[w]e have information that shipments of military supplies are crossing the border from Syria into Iraq, including night vision goggles.” Also, Israeli sources have referred to reports that Iraq has shipped some of its missiles and its chemical and biological weapons to Syria for safekeeping. On April 7, 2003, however, U.S. General Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters that there is no evidence that weapons of mass destruction have been moved from Iraq to another country (“For Some, Syria Looms as Next Goal,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 2003). In his congressional testimony on September 16, Under Secretary Bolton mentioned reports that Iraq covertly transferred lethal weapons to Syria to hide them from U.N. inspectors but said the United States has been unable to confirm that such transfers occurred. Many analysts are skeptical of these reports.

Arms Proliferation

Over the past three decades, Syria has acquired an arsenal of chemical weapons (CW) and surface-to-surface missiles, reportedly has conducted research and development in biological weapons (BW), and may be interested in a nuclear weapons capability. Its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, however, are hampered by limited resources and reliance on external sources of supply. Primary emphasis has been on the development of CW and missile capabilities — sometimes described as “poor man’s nuclear weapons.” In the past, there has been little evidence of intent on Syria’s part to acquire nuclear weapons; rather, Syria has sought to build up its CW and missile capabilities as a “force equalizer” to counter Israeli nuclear capabilities. (“Syria Built Arsenal As ‘Equalizer’” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2003.) However, increasing U.S. concerns over an apparent nexus between terrorism and WMD in the post-September 11 era has brought added attention from the Bush Administration to possible efforts by states like Syria to pursue a broader range of WMD programs.

In a speech to the Heritage Foundation on May 6, 2002, Under Secretary Bolton grouped Syria with Libya and Cuba as rogue states that support international terrorism (see below) and are pursuing the development of WMD. On October 9, 2002, Under Secretary Bolton reportedly told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “[w]e remain very concerned that nuclear and missile programs of Iran and others, including Syria, continue to receive the benefits of Russian technology and expertise.” In his briefing for the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia on September 16, 2003, Bolton described

a range of Syrian WMD programs and voiced particular concern over the sharing of Russian technology with Syria.

Following is a brief summary of Syria's WMD programs from available information, including Mr. Bolton's testimony and an unclassified CIA study covering the period from January through June 2002.

Chemical and Biological. Syria, which has not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, reportedly has a stockpile of the nerve agent sarin and may be working on a more toxic and persistent nerve agent like VX. Syria is reported to have three production facilities for chemical weapons but remains dependent on external sources for key elements of its CW program including precursor chemicals and key production equipment. Little information is available on Syrian biological programs; however, the preparers of the 2002 CIA study estimate that "[i]t is highly probable that Syria also is continuing to develop an offensive BW capability." Syria has signed, but not ratified, the Biological Weapons Convention.

Nuclear. Syria has one small Chinese-supplied nuclear research reactor, which is under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. Syria and Russia have agreed on a draft program for cooperation on civil nuclear power. According to the 2002 CIA study, "In principle, broader access to Russian expertise provides opportunities for Syria to expand its indigenous capabilities, should it decide to pursue nuclear weapons." Syria acceded to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1969; however, Under Secretary Bolton expressed concern that Syria, like Iran, has not signed the IAEA Additional Protocol, which provides for short-notice inspections of nuclear facilities.

Missiles. Syria has one of the largest missile inventories in the Middle East, consisting of several hundred short-to-medium range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. Once reliant on the former Soviet Union, Syria has turned more recently to Iran, North Korea, and China for assistance with its missile programs. According to the 2002 CIA study, Syria continued to receive help from abroad in establishing a solid-propellant rocket motor development and production capability and is seeking assistance from Russia and North Korea in its liquid propellant missile programs. Bolton, in his September 2003 testimony, suggests that regional concerns may seek a longer range missile on the order of the North Korean No Dong medium-range ballistic missile.

Advanced Conventional Weapons. Syria continues to obtain small amounts of conventional military equipment from Russia and other former Soviet-bloc suppliers. Syria reportedly wants to obtain Russian air defense systems (SA-10/SA-11), fighter aircraft (MiG-29, Su-27), and tanks (T-80, T-90), as well as upgrades for weapons already in Syrian inventories; however, Syria's lack of money combined with its outstanding debt to Russia (estimated several years ago at between \$10 and \$12 billion) have precluded any significant acquisitions of weaponry.

Terrorist Activity

Since 1979, Syria has appeared regularly on a list of countries which the State Department identifies as sponsors of international terrorism (see below). According to the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2002*, published on April 30, 2003

(hereinafter referred to as *Patterns 2002*), Syria has not been implicated directly in a terrorist act since 1986, when Syrian intelligence was implicated in an abortive attempt to place a bomb on an El Al airliner in London. The State Department report states, however, that Syria continued to provide political and limited material support to a number of Palestinian groups, some of which have committed terrorist acts, and allows them to maintain offices in Damascus. The State Department notes that Syria also continued to permit Iranian resupply via Damascus of the Lebanese Shi'ite Muslim militia Hizballah in Lebanon. Syria maintains that the Palestinian offices in Damascus are engaged only in political and informational activities rather than terrorism. Syria acknowledges its support for Palestinians pursuing armed struggle in Israeli occupied territories and for Shi'ite Muslim militias that target Israeli forces in the Shib'a Farms area, claiming that such operations constitute legitimate resistance activity, as distinguished from terrorism.

Reaction to Terrorist Attacks on the United States. Since the September 11 attacks, a number of reports indicate that Syria has cooperated with the United States in investigating Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization and persons associated with it. In June 2002, press articles reported that Syria had provided the United States with information gained from the interrogation of a key figure in the September 11 planning, Muhammad Hayder Zammar, who was extradited from Morocco to Syria, where he faced pending charges. (Sources quoted in a *Washington Post* article of January 31, 2003 alleged that Zammar had been tortured by Syrian authorities.) In mid-June, President Bashar al-Asad told reporters that Syria had provided information to the United States in recent months on a planned Al Qaeda operation that would have killed U.S. soldiers had it succeeded. On June 18, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State William Burns told a congressional panel that "the cooperation the Syrians have provided in their own self-interest on Al Qaeda has saved American lives." The State Department's *Patterns 2002* report on terrorism notes that Syria has discouraged any signs of public support for Al Qaeda including in the media and at mosques. According to a subsequent news report ("Syrian Reforms Gain Momentum In Wake Of War," *Washington Post*, May 12, 2003), Syria helped unravel a plot by an Al Qaeda group in Canada to attack U.S. and Canadian government institutions.

On the other hand, Syria remains unwilling to sever its ties with Hizballah and with militant Palestinian organizations such as Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) that have carried out suicide bombings in Israel and the West Bank. In a speech on April 4, 2002, President Bush noted that "Syria has spoken out against Al Qaeda. We expect it to act against Hamas and Hizballah, as well." In his speech on June 24, 2002, President Bush said nations committed to peace must halt the flow of money, equipment, and recruits to terrorist groups seeking the destruction of Israel, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hizballah. President Bush added that "Syria must choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organizations." In a subsequent interview published on July 1, 2002, President Bashar al-Asad said Syria supports "the Lebanese national resistance, including Hizballah ... politically and in the media because the brothers in the Lebanese resistance do not need military support from Syria." Regarding Palestinian groups, Asad said "their work is limited to political and media activities" and "their offices in Damascus provide political representation to the 400,000 Palestinians living in Syria....." More recently, in an interview published on May 25, 2003, Asad reiterated his previous position that Hizballah is a Lebanese resistance party and asserted that Israel rather than Hizballah is responsible for provoking attacks in this area.

Secretary Powell's Visit. Secretary Powell addressed current U.S. concerns during talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad in Damascus on May 3, amid earlier speculation that Syria might be a future target of U.S. military action. Powell subsequently described the May 3 talks as a "good, candid exchange of views" but went on to say that there would be consequences to Syrian actions, especially if Syria continued supporting terrorist organizations or attempted to harbor escapees from Iraq. After the talks, Powell told reporters that Syria had closed some Palestinian offices linked to terrorism; however, representatives of the affected organizations and Syrian government officials did not confirm the closures, and some commentators thought Syria was scaling back the offices rather than closing them entirely. In the *Washington Post* interview mentioned above, President Asad drew a further distinction, stating that "I talked with Mr. Powell about stopping 'activities,' not closures." Commenting on alleged promises by Asad during the May 3 meeting, Powell said "[o]bviously, I welcome what he said he was going to do. And I hope he, on reflection, is willing to do even more. But the only thing that really counts is performance."

Since the May 3 meeting, Secretary Powell has expressed dissatisfaction with Syria's failure to take meaningful steps against terrorism. On May 11, Powell warned that President Asad "will find that he is on the wrong side of history" if he does not move against terrorism, help round up key aides of Saddam, and discourage the spread of weapons of mass destructions (WMD). At a press conference on June 20, he said the Syrians "took some limited steps, those limited steps are totally inadequate." Powell repeated these warnings several times during the summer of 2003. In a follow-up visit to Damascus on August 14, Assistant Secretary of State William Burns emphasized to Asad the need for Syria to restrain activities of terrorist groups present in or operating through Syria; to use its influence to keep the Israeli-Lebanese border quiet; and to police its borders (particularly with Iraq). A State Department spokesman credited the Syrians with limited progress in preventing terrorists from crossing the border with Iraq, in expelling some terrorists, and in closing the offices of some terrorist organizations, but said that progress is insufficient so far and that Syria needs to take further steps in all of these directions. He commented that Burns conveyed these points to Asad "to make sure he [Asad] understood and Syrians continue to understand that we expect to see continued progress, we expect to see significant progress, and we'll keep pressing in that direction."² A Syrian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said the Asad-Burns talks were constructive, but Asad maintained that firings by Hizballah on the Israeli border were in reaction to provocations by Israeli forces.

U.S. Aid and Sanctions

Since 1950, the United States has provided a total of \$627.5 million in aid to Syria: \$34.0 million in development assistance, \$438.0 million in economic support, \$155.4 million in food assistance, and \$61 thousand in military training assistance. Most of this aid was provided during a brief warming trend in bilateral relations between 1974 and 1979. Significant projects funded under U.S. aid included water supply, irrigation, rural roads and electrification, and health and agricultural research. No aid has been provided to Syria since

² "Richard Boucher Holds State Department Briefing," State Department Regular News Briefing, Federal Document Clearing House, Inc., August 19, 2003. [<http://global.factiva.com/en/arch/display.asp>]

1981, when the last aid programs were closed out. At present, a variety of legislative provisions and executive directives prohibit U.S. aid to Syria and restrict bilateral trade. Principal examples follow. (For a more comprehensive list of sanctions applicable to Syria, see CRS Report RL30644, *Syria: Sanctions and Aid*, August 20, 2000.)

General Sanctions Applicable to Syria

The International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976 [P.L. 94-329]. Section 303 of this act [90 Stat. 753-754] required termination of foreign assistance to countries that aid or abet international terrorism. This provision was incorporated into the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 as Section 620A [22 USC 2371]. (Syria was not affected by this ban until 1979, as explained below.)

The Export Administration Act of 1979 [P.L. 96-72]. Section 6(i) of this act [93 Stat. 515] required the Secretary of Commerce and the Secretary of State to notify Congress before licensing export of goods or technology valued at more than \$7 million to countries determined to have supported acts of international terrorism (Amendments adopted in 1985 and 1986 re-lettered Section 6(i) as 6(j) and lowered the threshold for notification from \$7 million to \$1 million.)

A by-product of these two laws was the so-called state sponsors of terrorism list. This list is prepared annually by the State Department in accordance with Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act. The list identifies those countries that repeatedly have provided support for acts of international terrorism. Syria has appeared on this list ever since it was first prepared in 1979; it appears most recently in the State Department's annual publication *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2002*, published in April 2003. Syria's inclusion on this list in 1979 triggered the above-mentioned aid sanctions under P.L. 94-329 and trade restrictions under P.L. 96-72.

Omnibus Diplomatic Security and Antiterrorism Act of 1986 [P.L. 99-399]. Section 509(a) of this act [100 Stat. 853] amended Section 40 of the Arms Export Control Act to prohibit export of items on the munitions list to countries determined to be supportive of international terrorism, thus banning any U.S. military equipment sales to Syria. (This ban was reaffirmed by the Anti-Terrorism and Arms Export Amendments Act of 1989 — see below.) Also, 10 U.S.C. 2249a bans obligation of U.S. Defense Department funds for assistance to countries on the terrorism list.

Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986 [P.L. 99-509]. Section 8041(a) of this Act [100 Stat. 1962] amended the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 to deny foreign tax credits on income or war profits from countries identified by the Secretary of State as supporting international terrorism. [26 USC 901].

The Anti-Terrorism and Arms Export Control Amendments Act of 1989 [P.L. 101-222]. Section 4 amended Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act to impose a congressional notification and licensing requirement for export of goods or technology, irrespective of dollar value, to countries on the terrorism list, if such exports could contribute to their military capability or enhance their ability to support terrorism.

Section 4 also prescribed conditions for removal of a country from the terrorism list: prior notification by the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the chairmen of two specified committees of the Senate. In conjunction with the requisite notification, the President must certify that the country has met several conditions that clearly indicate it is no longer involved in supporting terrorist activity. (In some cases, certification must be provided 45 days in advance of removal of a country from the terrorist list.)

The Anti-Economic Discrimination Act of 1994 [Part C, P.L. 103-236, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, FY1994-1995]. Section 564(a) bans the sale or lease of U.S. defense articles and services to any country that questions U.S. firms about their compliance with the Arab boycott of Israel. Section 564(b) contains provisions for a presidential waiver, but no such waiver has been exercised in Syria's case. Again, this provision is moot in Syria's case because of other prohibitions already in effect.

The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 [P.L. 104-132]. This Act requires the President to withhold aid to third countries that provide assistance (Section 325) or lethal military equipment (Section 326) to countries on the terrorism list, but allows the President to waive this provisions on grounds of national interest. A similar provision banning aid to third countries that sell lethal equipment to countries on the terrorism list is contained in Section 549 of the Foreign Operations Appropriation Act for FY2001 (H.R. 5526, passed by reference in H.R. 4811, which was signed by President Clinton as P.L. 106-429 on November 6, 2000).

Also, Section 321 of P.L. 104-132 makes it a criminal offense for U.S. persons (citizens or resident aliens) to engage in financial transactions with governments of countries on the terrorism list, except as provided in regulations issued by the Department of the Treasury in consultation with the Secretary of State. In the case of Syria, the implementing regulation prohibits such transactions "with respect to which the United States person knows or has reasonable cause to believe that the financial transaction poses a risk of furthering terrorist acts in the United States." (31 CFR 596, published in the Federal Register August 23, 1996, p. 43462.) In the fall of 1996, the Chairman of the House International Relations Committee reportedly protested to then President Clinton over the Treasury Department's implementing regulation, which he described as a "special loophole" for Syria. Several subsequent measures were introduced in previous Congresses to forbid virtually all financial transactions with Syria but were not enacted.

Section 531 of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2003* (P.L. 108-7) bans aid to countries not in compliance with U.N. Security Council sanctions against Iraq. This ban would be applicable to exports of Iraqi oil through Syria or to reported shipments of military equipment via Syria to Iraq; however, it may be moot following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

Specific Sanctions Against Syria

In addition to the general sanctions listed above, specific provisions in foreign assistance appropriations enacted since 1981 have barred Syria by name from receiving U.S. aid. The most recent ban appears in H.J.Res. 2, the *Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003* (P.L. 108-7, February 20, 2003). Section 507 bans direct U.S. assistance to seven named countries including Syria. Section 527 bans U.S. aid to countries identified as

supporting international terrorism, while Section 543 bans aid to countries that provide lethal equipment to such countries.

Section 307 of the *Foreign Assistance Act of 1961*, amended by Section 431 of the *Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY1994-1995* (P.L. 103-236, April 30, 1994), requires the United States to withhold a proportionate share of contributions to international organizations for programs that benefit eight specified countries or entities, including Syria. Section 512 of H.J.Res. 2 (P.L. 108-7), sometimes known as the Brooke Amendment after an earlier version of this provision, bans assistance to any country in default of to the United States for over a year. As of December 31, 2001 (latest figures available), Syria owed the United States \$237.8 million (including \$116.3 million in arrears) in principal payments, mainly on loans under the Commodity Credit Corporation or from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) remaining from the period when Syria received U.S. assistance; Syria also owed \$138.8 million in interest arrears.

Drawing on appropriate legislation, U.S. Administrations have imposed detailed trade restrictions on exports to Syria. Under Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act of 1979, trade controls were instituted after Syria was designated as a country supporting international terrorism in 1979, and further controls were imposed after Syrian intelligence was implicated in an abortive airline bombing in 1986. At present, the Department of Commerce list 31 categories of exports requiring a validated license for shipment to Syria; these include aircraft, vessels, most vehicles, parts, machine tools, computer equipment, and other high technology goods. (Routine exports like foodstuffs are exempt from these controls.) Moreover, the Commerce Department generally denies export licenses for dual use equipment or to military end-users in Syria. In 2002, Syria ranked 94th among U.S. trading partners, with \$112.4 million in U.S. imports from Syria (mainly mineral oils and fuels, antiques, apparel, spices) and \$269.4 million in U.S. exports to Syria (mainly cereals, machinery, appliances and parts, tobacco, and electronic appliances). These figures represent a decrease in U.S. imports from Syria (\$142.9 million in 2001) and an increase in U.S. exports to Syria (\$224.0 million in 2001).

Recent Congressional Action

The Syrian Accountability Acts. On April 18, 2002, largely similar bills were introduced in the House (H.R. 4483) and the Senate (S. 2215), both entitled *The Syria Accountability Act of 2002*, that would have imposed additional U.S. sanctions against Syria unless it halted support for international terrorism, ended its occupation of Lebanese territory, stopped the development of mass destruction weapons, and ceased illegal imports of Iraqi oil. In press interviews on September 3 and 4, 2002, a U.S. State Department official said the Bush Administration disapproved of the proposed legislation; the official was quoted as saying it would restrict the President's maneuverability in dealing with Middle East affairs. Hearings on H.R. 4483 were held by the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, on September 18, 2002. The 107th Congress adjourned without floor action on either bill.

H.R. 1828. On April 12, 2003, Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Eliot Engel introduced the *Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003*, which is largely similar to the predecessor bill H.R. 4483. According to a statement by Representative Engel's office, this bill "holds Syria accountable for its support for terrorism,

occupation of Lebanon, and possession and continued development of weapons of mass destruction.” The bill would require the President to impose penalties on Syria unless it ceases support for international terrorist groups, withdraws all military and security personnel from Lebanon, ceases the development of WMD, and is no longer in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions imposing trade bans on Iraq (Section 5(a) and 5(d)). Sanctions would include bans on the export of military items (already banned under other legislation) and of dual use items to Syria, and there would be no provision for waiving these bans (Section 5(a)(1)). In addition, the President would be required to impose two or more sanctions from a menu of six: a ban on all exports to Syria except food and medicine, a ban on U.S. businesses operating or investing in Syria, a ban on landing in or overflight of the United States by Syrian aircraft, reduction of diplomatic contacts with Syria, restrictions on travel by Syrian diplomats in the United States, and blocking of transactions in Syrian property (Section 5(a)(2)). With the partial exception of the ban on Syrian aircraft, the sanctions listed on this menu represent new sanctions over and above those already in effect against Syria. The President would have the authority to waive Section 5(a)(2) on grounds of vital national security interest.

Another provision of H.R. 1828, Section 5(c), sets additional requirements for resumption of U.S. development aid to Syria and Lebanon: fulfillment of the conditions in Section 5(d) above; substantial progress toward peace treaties between Israel and Syria and between Israel and Lebanon; and respect by Syria for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of Lebanon.

H.R. 1828 is similar in most respects to its predecessor bill in the 107th Congress, H.R. 4483. However, H.R. 1828 omits two sanctions contained in the predecessor bill, H.R. 4483: a ban on U.S. government assistance to U.S. businesses investing in Syria; and a ban on the conduct of programs of two small agencies — the Overseas Private Investment Corporation and the Trade Development Agency — in Syria. These bans already effectively exist under other legislation and related U.S. government guidelines.

S. 982. On May 1, 2003, Senators Barbara Boxer and Rick Santorum introduced a companion bill, S. 982, which imposes largely similar sanctions to those contained in H.R. 1828. The Senate bill, however, does not contain one item on the menu of sanctions listed in H.R. 1828, namely, the ban on Syrian aircraft landing in or overflying the United States.

Administration Position. Although the Administration opposed the predecessor bill in the 107th Congress (H.R. 4483), it has not taken a public position on H.R. 1828. Secretary Powell, however, while discussing U.S. concerns over Syrian policies, mentioned that this bill is gathering support in Congress. In his statement before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia on September 16, 2003, Under Secretary Bolton noted that many sanctions already applicable to Syria are duplicated in the proposed Syria Accountability Act; he went on to say that “the administration has not taken a position [on the bill] and we have it under continuing review.” In a press conference on October 8, however, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher responded to a question about the Administration’s position on the Syria Accountability Act as follows:

I would say that at this point, we had told the Syrians that this type of move was likely, that we expected to see it. And frankly, the Syrians have done so little with regard to terrorism that we don’t have a lot to work with. There is nothing — there’s no particular

reason or facts that one could go back to the Congress to, with, [sic] and say, "This is a bad idea."

Further Action. On October 8, 2003, the House International Relations Committee reported H.R. 1828 favorably to the full House by a roll call vote of 33 to 2. Earlier, the Committee approved an amendment to reflect the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and condemn Syrian-sponsored terrorism against coalition forces in Iraq; the Committee rejected an amendment that would have allowed the President to decline to appoint a U.S. ambassador to Syria and to refuse the diplomatic credentials of a Syrian envoy to Washington. Congressional sources indicate that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold a hearing on the Senate version of the Syria Accountability Act (S. 982) later in October.

Other Legislation. On May 14, 2002, President Bush signed H.R. 3525, the *Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002* (P.L. 107-173), which bans non-immigrant visas to any alien from any country that sponsors international terrorism unless the Secretary of State and other senior U.S. officials certify that such alien does not pose a threat to U.S. national security.

Alternatives and Implications

Debate has continued within U.S. Administrations and Congress over the lengths to which the United States should go in seeking to enlist Syrian support for U.S. endeavors in the Middle East. According to one theory, normal bilateral relations should be contingent upon a clear renunciation by Syria of terrorism, programs to develop mass destruction weapons, and other policies injurious to U.S. interests. Advocates of this view are particularly concerned over any possibility that the Administration has made promises to ease sanctions (for example, removing Syria from the terrorism list) to obtain Syrian cooperation in regional affairs. They tend to discourage bilateral contacts such as visits by Syrian officials, which they see as a potential vehicle for trapping a U.S. Administration into premature concessions. They favor continued legislation to ensure that relaxation of sanctions can occur only with congressional approval.

According to a second theory, quiet diplomacy aimed at encouraging Syria to play a constructive and responsible role in regional affairs could yield benefits. Proponents of this approach do not advocate the immediate termination of sanctions (such as removing Syria from the terrorism list) without further action on Syria's part; however, they support wider contacts between diplomatic and security officials of the two countries to discuss sensitive issues, seek common ground, and identify possible areas of cooperation. They favor a series of small, reciprocal steps that could lead to a warmer relationship over time. Rather than legislative sanctions, they generally prefer an arrangement under which the Administration has the flexibility to apply or ease sanctions in accordance with the current state of bilateral relations.