

The Syria Accountability Act Taking the Wrong Road to Damascus

by **Claude Salhani**

Executive Summary

On December 12, 2003, President Bush signed into law the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, a law designed to pressure Syrian president Bashar Assad's government to work more aggressively in fighting terrorism at home and abroad. Implementation of the new measures, which combine punitive economic sanctions with diplomatic pressure, threatens to escalate into a new conflict in the Middle East. Some influential people in Washington welcomed such a confrontation, believing that it would lead to regime change in Damascus similar to the one that was effected in neighboring Iraq.

A replay of the invasion of Iraq, and the overthrow of yet another government in the region, would spell disaster for the United States. Some of the charges lobbed at Syria sound eerily similar to those leveled against Iraq before the war:

support for terrorism and possession of weapons of mass destruction. The Bush administration further accuses Syria of facilitating the passage of busloads of jihadi fighters across its border to fight American troops in Iraq and of hiding some of Saddam's missing weapons.

The sponsors of the Syria Accountability Act directed their attention to Assad's government. But, although the Syria Accountability Act provides the United States with a new collection of sticks with which to beat Damascus, there are precious few carrots to encourage continued cooperation by Syria in the fight against Al Qaeda. The Syria Accountability Act leads in the wrong direction in the fight against anti-American terrorists by escalating an unnecessary conflict in the Middle East that will only strengthen those who wish us harm.

Claude Salhani is foreign editor and a political news analyst with United Press International in Washington, DC. He is the author of Black September to Desert Storm (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998) and contributing author to The Iraq War (London: Brassey's, 2003).

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Spreading Democracy by Force of Arms

If President Bush's speech at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington on November 6, 2003, is any indication of policies to come, it would appear that not only Iraq but other Middle Eastern countries, too, could be on the list for regime change. The president asserted that the lack of democracy in the Middle East traced to the failed "political and economic doctrines" practiced by autocratic governments in the region.¹ The implication was clear: if the United States is serious about unseating Middle Eastern dictators, eradicating the threat of terrorism, and installing democracy, why stop at Iraq?

Syria's government is near the top of the target list. Long before the fall of Baghdad last spring there were people inside the Washington Beltway, including former U.S. ambassador to Morocco Marc Ginsberg, Frank Gaffney Jr. of the Center for Security Policy, and former Pentagon official Jed Babbin, who believed the United States should adopt a more aggressive policy toward Damascus, one similar to the stance taken vis-à-vis Saddam Hussein.²

Typical were the remarks of Michael Ledeen, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, who declared in an April 2003 address, "The time for diplomacy is at an end; it is time for a free Iran, free Syria and free Lebanon."³

Key components of the hard-line approach to Syria are the tightening of economic sanctions and the imposition of new diplomatic pressures, embodied within the Syria Accountability Act. This legislation, championed by Reps. Eliot Engel (D-NY) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), among others, and passed by huge bipartisan majorities in Congress in November, was signed into law on December 12, 2003. The legislation calls on the president to adopt new punitive measures against the government in Damascus in order to "hold Syria accountable for the serious international security problems it has caused

in the Middle East." The punitive measures envisioned under the act include banning all business activity between the United States and Syria, restricting the movement of Syrian diplomats in the United States, and prohibiting Syria-based aircraft from operating in U.S. airspace.⁴

Despite the fact that the Bush administration's hard-line policies in the Middle East have so far proved ineffectual, the president and his neoconservative advisers continue to press ahead with an aggressive and dangerous agenda of confrontation. The failure of the Middle East Road Map, which was meant to bring about a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and the lack of success in containing terrorism and installing democracy in Iraq following regime change in Baghdad are ample proof of policies in need of reassessment.

The policy of imposing democracy by force is dangerous because it diverts attention from terrorism and avoids addressing the things that foster hatred of the Western democracies. It divides natural allies in the fight against Al Qaeda and rallies America's enemies. And as we have seen in Iraq, regime change does not lead to security. Indeed, to the contrary, Al Qaeda-related terrorist activity has increased since the United States launched the war on Iraq, as shown by the following list of deadly attacks:

- Davao, Philippines (March 4, 2003): 21 killed, 150 wounded in attack on Davao International Airport
- Koronadal, Philippines (May 11, 2003): 9 killed
- Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (May 12, 2003): 35 killed, including 8 Americans
- Casablanca, Morocco (May 16, 2003): 28 killed, 100 injured
- Jakarta, Indonesia (August 5, 2003): 12 killed, 150 injured in attack on J.W. Marriott Hotel
- Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (November 9, 2003): 17 killed, 122 wounded at housing complex
- Istanbul, Turkey (November 15, 2003):

23 killed at synagogues

- Istanbul, Turkey (November 20, 2003): 27 killed, 400 wounded at British Consulate and London-based bank

To this list must be added the continuing spate of attacks and bombings in Iraq, including the devastating bombings of the Jordanian Embassy, the UN headquarters, and the Najaf mosque. In early December, attacks against coalition forces were estimated by Pentagon officials to number about 35–40 a day, and the number of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq as of February 5, 2004, stood at 528.⁵

The threat to U.S. citizens and interests from anti-American terrorists has not abated in the months since the American military's victory in Iraq. Instead of expanding a conflict between the United States and the Arab world, as the war in Iraq has done, Washington should concentrate its efforts on the much more imminent danger posed to the United States by Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.⁶ By engaging in a war in Iraq, the Bush administration has brought down on the United States a host of new challenges. "The terrorists are accomplishing something the Bush administration is accused of having neglected," wrote Jim Hoagland in the *Washington Post* in early December 2003, "they are 'internationalizing' this struggle."⁷

Notwithstanding the mounting evidence of the failures of U.S. policy toward Iraq, some people in the administration advocate a tougher approach to countries—such as Syria—that have been helpful to the United States in the war on terror. That confrontational stance could result in a severe setback on the intelligence front, which could spell disaster for the United States.

The Carrot and the Stick

With regard to the Palestinians, and now the Syrians, the Bush administration believes that the stick is far more effective than the carrot in achieving American security objectives in the Middle East. That belief demon-

strates a remarkable ignorance of Levantine culture. Saving face is of paramount importance in the Middle East. That helps to explain why overt pressure rarely results in capitulation by Middle Eastern leaders.

In the case of the Palestinians, the combined efforts of the White House and the Department of State (and Israel) to sideline Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat, and to bring a new interlocutor to the forefront, have consistently failed. Despite its most strenuous efforts, the Bush administration has been unsuccessful in removing Arafat from the political scene and rendering him "irrelevant." Although Arafat has taken somewhat of a back seat in negotiating with the Israelis and the United States, leaving that task to his appointed ministers, he remains in overall charge of security affairs in the Palestinian Territories, which at the end of the day translates into his retaining the real power in the Palestinian Authority.

This policy even raised criticism from Avraham Shalom, a former head of Shabak, Israel's internal security service, who said: "We are not going to decide who is relevant and who is not. This was the mother of all mistakes regarding Arafat. . . . The fact is that without him nothing moves."⁸

In the case of Syria, raising the stakes and holding the Syria Accountability Act as a sword of Damocles over Damascus does little to encourage cooperation and bring the Syrians to the negotiating table. Enforcement may indeed have the reverse effect—that of placing Syria in a corner with its back to the wall.

The act directs President Bush to block the shipment of certain goods to Syria and urges him to adopt a variety of punitive measures ranging from a complete ban on exports (with the exception of food and medicine) to limiting the movement of Syrian diplomats in the United States and barring Syrian aircraft from operating in U.S. airspace.

The natural instinct of a cornered enemy is not to cooperate but to fight back with renewed vigor. Instead of inviting such a response, the United States should promote

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dialogue and foster engagement. “To encourage progress,” wrote Daniel Byman, an assistant professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University, “the United States should couple its sticks with carrots,” and offer Syria “some positive incentives to cooperate.”⁹

The Path to Confrontation

A few hardliners, however, prefer confrontation. The neoconservatives close to President Bush believe that the United States should exploit the presence of large numbers of U.S. combat personnel and materiel already positioned in next-door Iraq and proceed with the “de-Baathification” of both Damascus and Baghdad.¹⁰

In fact, since the start of hostilities in Iraq last March, Syrian president Bashar Assad’s government has never completely fallen off Washington’s political radar. Soon after the attack on Iraq, Under Secretary of State John R. Bolton, speaking to Arabs on the American-financed Arabic-language station Radio Sawa, said Iraq was just the start. “We are hoping that the elimination of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein and the elimination of all of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction would be important lessons to other countries in the region.” The cost of pursuing weapons of mass destruction, Bolton warned, “is potentially quite high.”¹¹

In the days immediately following the fall of Baghdad, the mood in Damascus was indeed tense. Many Syrians in all echelons of society and power expected American tanks to come rolling across the border for a repeat performance.¹²

Accusations against Syria

The litany of accusations lobbed by the Bush administration at Syria included assisting the Iraqi military by providing them with night-vision goggles; abetting high-ranking members of the fleeing Iraqi Baath Party; allowing Islamist jihadis to cross the porous border into Iraq to fight American troops; supporting major terrorist organizations, a number of which maintain offices in

Damascus; and possessing and continuing development of weapons of mass destruction. Others accused Syria of hiding Saddam Hussein’s missing weapons of mass destruction and put forward that scenario as a logical explanation for why those materials were not found inside Iraq.¹³

The accusations seem absurd on their face. As Imad Mustafa, a senior Syrian diplomat in Washington, DC, commented at the time, “Are we that crazy to open the gates of hell upon us?”¹⁴

Since then, Washington’s focus on Damascus may have diminished, but it has certainly not disappeared. In September 2003, David Wurmser, a former special assistant to Under Secretary Bolton at the State Department and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, moved to the office of Vice President Dick Cheney with specific responsibilities for the Middle East. Wurmser is a staunch supporter of the stick, rather than the carrot, approach when it comes to Syria, and he has long called for the United States and Israel to present a unified—and hard-line—front when dealing with Syria.¹⁵

Under Secretary of State Bolton signaled the shift in administration policy when he announced that the administration had dropped its objection to the bill. Taking that as a cue, Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY) exulted, “I think it’s time to pass this important legislation.”¹⁶ The pressure on Syria then built at other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. At a roundtable discussion on September 17, 2003, on Capitol Hill, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) accused the Syrians of running “a terror center near Damascus.”¹⁷ Weeks later, the Israeli air force bombed a site just outside the Syrian capital that it said was a terrorist training facility belonging to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization, after an IJO suicide bomber blew himself up in Israel, killing 19 people on the eve of Yom Kippur.¹⁸

Believing that overt military action was not enough, friends of Israel and enemies of Syria stepped up their efforts to pass the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003. The act represented a

renewed effort to have sanctions imposed on Syria as punishment for failing to toe the U.S. line and reflected frustration that, as Marc Ginsberg, a former U.S. ambassador to Morocco, declared in September, “Syria continues to believe it can ignore any threat from the U.S.”¹⁹

What the advocates of a confrontational approach to Syria seem not to understand, however, is that there is a difference between pressuring and bullying individuals or countries with which the United States intends to do business. Rightly or wrongly, much of Washington’s hard-line policy in the Middle East is seen as benefiting Israel to the detriment of the Arab world. And that belief is building resentment in a region where Washington is trying hard to win hearts and minds.

Tony Judt, director of the Remarque Institute at New York University, perceives a disturbing pattern. “We are now making belligerent noises toward Syria,” Judt wrote in October, “because Israeli intelligence has assured us that Iraqi weapons have been moved there . . . Syria backs Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad: sworn foes of Israel, to be sure, but hardly a significant international threat.”²⁰

Even allies and one-time friends of Washington are questioning U.S. foreign policy. “The war in Iraq has exposed the United States to charges of arrogance from its friends and imperialism from its enemies,” warns Byman in *Foreign Affairs*.²¹ Former secretary of state Warren Christopher laments, “Now, three years into the Bush II era, American standing and credibility in the world have dropped to their lowest points in decades.”²²

An added danger in alienating Damascus would be the loss of access to important intelligence the Syrians have been sharing with the United States since 9/11. “Damascus has hitherto been providing the U.S. with critical data on al-Qaeda,” wrote Judt. “Like Iran, another longstanding target of Israeli wrath whom we are actively alienating, Syria is more use to the United States as a friend than an enemy,” he opined.²³

Ignoring those and other warnings, the U.S. Senate on November 11, 2003, passed the Syria Accountability Act, with 89 votes in favor and only 4 votes opposed. A month earlier the House of Representatives had passed a slightly different version by a vote of 398 to 4. The House subsequently approved the Senate version, and President Bush signed the bill into law on December 12, 2003.²⁴

In a statement issued at the time of Bush’s signing, the White House characterized the legislation as “intended to strengthen the ability of the United States to conduct an effective foreign policy.”²⁵ It is useful, however, to look at what sanctions are likely to accomplish, particularly given that President Bush opposed passage of the act as recently as 2002.

The Costs and Consequences of the Syria Accountability Act

The legislation was rushed through Congress and was signed into law even after Syrian foreign minister Faruq al-Shara, responding to U.S. accusations that Damascus was not doing enough to end support for terrorist activity, had said that Syria would meet any “logical and realistic” demands from the United States.²⁶

The Syria Accountability Act—placing economic and political pressure on Syria—is meant to force President Assad and his government to cooperate more closely with the United States. Its purpose is to convince the Syrians that they must distance and disassociate themselves from terrorist groups they have been accused of supporting.

The original intentions behind the legislation, and the likely ramifications of the enforcement of the act itself, deserve careful scrutiny. Instead, the notion of a thoughtful and deliberate review was buried beneath a bipartisan rush to escalate the conflict. The majority of policymakers on Capitol Hill supported the legislation because they saw it either as an extension of the war on terrorism

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or as a move that would win them votes with their constituents.

The act directs the president to block the export to Syria of items on the United States Munitions List or Commerce Control List of dual-use items. It also requires that the president impose two or more of the following sanctions on Syria:

- Prohibit the export of U.S. products (other than food and medicine) to Syria
- Prohibit U.S. businesses from investing or operating in Syria
- Restrict the movement of Syrian diplomats in Washington, DC, and New York
- Prohibit aircraft of any air carrier owned or controlled by Syria to take off from, land in, or fly over the United States
- Reduce U.S. diplomatic contacts with Syria other than those required to protect U.S. interests or carry out the purposes of the act
- Block transactions in any property in which the government of Syria has any interest or with respect to any property subject to the jurisdiction of the United States²⁷

In signing the legislation, President Bush agreed to abide by the spirit of the provisions of the act but asserted his authority to conduct foreign affairs unimpeded by congressional directive. The language of this message, and the White House's earlier opposition to the legislation, suggest that the president intends to keep his options open.

If the president is adopting a "wait and see" attitude, that may reflect the advice he is receiving from State Department officials and senior diplomats—experienced professionals with invaluable hands-on experience—who warn that this initiative is not in America's national interest.

The author spoke with six seasoned professionals from the State Department, including high-ranking officials who have served many years in Syria and other Arab countries but who asked not to be identified by name. They believe that the anti-Syrian

legislation will be counterproductive and will not profit U.S. interests. Those diplomats say that enforcing the act will instead marginalize Syria, making future negotiations all the more difficult. In addition, they fear it will infuriate an already volatile Arab world that since the invasion of Iraq has been eyeing Washington's moves in the region with renewed suspicion.

The Bush administration has called on the Assad regime to halt its support for terrorist organizations and to expel terrorist groups from Syria. Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command all maintain offices in Damascus. Forcibly shutting down the offices of those terrorist organizations, State Department diplomats argue, would only render the task of keeping tabs on them that much harder and would not really solve the problem at hand. It would be a largely superficial move—the groups could relocate elsewhere, including to places where it would be much harder to track and monitor their activities. As it stands, the act serves only to make self-gratifying political points, which would not translate to much in any practical or geostrategic, sense.

Syria sees its hold on terrorist groups, and its occupation of Lebanon, as the only cards it has to play in any future negotiations with Israel. It is important to remember that the main rallying point of Arab (and Muslim) discontent remains the Palestinian problem. Addressing that core issue—the Arab-Israeli dispute—would help the United States in its ongoing war against Al Qaeda and its affiliated organizations.

Thawing the Political Ice

To address the Arab-Israeli dispute, positive measures to facilitate the thawing of the political ice between Washington and Damascus are needed. A first step should be an undertaking to bring Syria into the political process, from which it is currently exclud-

ed. Without Syrian involvement, no lasting Middle East peace—including a settlement of the Palestinian question and stability in Iraq—could ever become a reality. Such actions would help to move the process of conflict resolution forward. Enforcing the Syria Accountability Act is a move in the opposite direction—toward confrontation and conflict.

Washington should engage Damascus in a dialogue that would allow the administration to use both carrots and sticks, measures to assist Assad, tied to specific constructive steps to be taken by his government. Assad wants to implement political, social, and economic reforms in his country, but he is competing with his father's old guard who want to maintain the status quo. The Syrian president had tried to bring about change but was quickly pulled back to the old ways by the conservative elements of the ruling Baath Party, who continue to dominate Syrian politics. Helping Assad achieve positive changes in Syrian society would help democracy in Syria. Instead of painting him into a political and diplomatic corner, the United States would find it far more beneficial to engage him and other moderate forces in the country.

"Bashar is someone who is genuinely interested in taking Syria in a new direction," said Flynt Leverett, a former senior director of Middle East affairs at the National Security Council who focused on Arab-Israeli issues (and a former senior analyst of Middle East and South Asian affairs at the Central Intelligence Agency). Leverett believes the United States has two options in Syria: supporting external forces in pushing for a change or engaging with the regime and society in Syria.

"Supporting outside forces strengthens hardliners," warns Leverett, citing Iraq as an example of the failure of that approach. "It did not work and we needed to send in U.S. troops to overthrow Saddam Hussein." Leverett urges U.S. policymakers to "engage the regime, but at the same time engage Syrian civil society."²⁸

At this juncture Assad needs all the help he can get to allow him to modernize and lib-

eralize. Imposing sanctions on Syria will only push him all the more into the grips of the old guard who will argue that cooperation with Washington is futile. The hardliners in Syria will point out that Washington is interested only in the stick approach to politics. In this environment, it will be even harder for the moderates to bring about change from within.

Syrian Help in Pressuring Middle Eastern Terrorists

Maintaining relations with the government in Damascus, as opposed to distancing it from Washington, is important to the U.S. war on terrorism. The U.S. Department of State has listed Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979, when the list was first created, but Syria has not been directly linked to any acts of terrorism since 1986, and the government officially bars groups based in Syria from launching terrorist attacks. More important, the government of Syria has no ties to Al Qaeda and has brutally repressed other Muslim fundamentalist groups—most notably the Muslim Brotherhood—that the government sees as a threat.²⁹

Alienating Damascus and consigning Syria to the diplomatic doghouse—as the Syria Accountability Act does—will result in Washington having less leverage to apply on Syria and, by extension, less leverage over terrorist groups. One of the likely consequences of U.S.-Syrian estrangement would be that Syria (by Hezbollah proxy) could escalate the already precarious situation along the Lebanese-Israeli border. Hezbollah and the Israelis have exchanged rocket fire on numerous occasions in the past year and remain just a hair away from escalating the situation into open warfare. The resulting conflict would have an effect just the opposite of one of the stated aims of the Syria Accountability Act, that of curbing terrorism and providing greater stability and protection for Israel from cross-border raids on northern Israeli towns and settlements.

Another likely danger is that the Syrians themselves would not react as Washington

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expects and would, instead of bending to pressure, turn more radical. Policy in Damascus (and other Mideastern countries) is not driven with an eye to campaigns for reelection every four years. A report by the Asia-Pacific Foundation asserted that the “Islamists are prepared to be patient and absorb casualties,” because they believe that the United States “can be defeated over time.”³⁰

Gen. Michel Aoun, a former Lebanese army commander in chief (and one-time maverick prime minister), accuses Syria of “playing the role of both arsonist and firefighter.”³¹ Byman in effect agrees, arguing, “Damascus can prompt violence by militants, as it did by making the disputed Shebaa Farms territory a Hezbollah concern, and can get those same militants to lie low when it wants to avoid a confrontation.”³²

Syria and Terrorism

Syrian complicity in supporting terrorism must not be tolerated. It is not as clear as General Aoun asserts, however, that Syria, and especially Assad’s government, has much control over terrorist groups, even those that operate from offices in Damascus. Circumstances in Syria are very different from those in Afghanistan circa September 2001, when the Taliban actively and openly supported Al Qaeda, an avowedly anti-American group that had murdered U.S. citizens on numerous occasions even before the September 11 attacks. U.S. policymakers should not presume that governments are supporters of terrorist groups merely because such groups happen to operate within their borders. After all, Al Qaeda is still thought to have cells in more than 60 countries more than two years after the post-September 11 crackdown began, and we do not refer to all of those countries as supporters of terrorism. Instead of waging an overly ambitious war against any group deemed by any other country to be a terrorist organization, and in the process destabilizing governments that might otherwise aid U.S. counter-terrorism efforts, the United States should follow a policy of helping the most

moderate elements emerge and distance themselves from the hardliners. That will prevent the emergence of new anti-American terrorist groups and will allow us to remain focused on the genuine threats that face us today.

Syria can be a supportive and active firefighter, helping the United States in its war on terror by sharing information on Al Qaeda and assisting U.S. intelligence. But imposing sanctions on Damascus would be received as a slap in the face by the Syrians, which could well spur them to play the role of arsonist, as Aoun warned. That would spell the end of cooperation between the Syrian and U.S. intelligence services, which has been ongoing since 9/11 and which has yielded positive results in the fight against Al Qaeda and its franchises. The Syrians have reportedly aided the United States in gathering information about Muhammad Atta, the reputed ringleader of the 9/11 attacks who spent time in the Syrian city of Aleppo. Damascus has also shared information about Syrian-born individuals associated with the Al Qaeda cell in Hamburg, Germany, and has allowed U.S. officials to question a Syrian-born German citizen being held in Syria.³³

U.S.-Syria Trade Is Minimal

There is no doubt that the threat of economic sanctions that accompanies the Syria Accountability Act does worry some Syrians. But in truth, the actual ramifications of the legislation are unclear.

The current level of trade between Syria and the United States, in fact, is not all that important in the first place. According to figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, exports to Syria from the United States in 2002 amounted to only \$274.2 million, and U.S. imports from Syria for the same year were only \$169.9 million.³⁴ By comparison, trade with Jordan for the same period totaled \$404.4 million for exports and \$412.4 million for imports.³⁵

U.S. exports to Syria for the period of January–August 2003 amounted to \$126.5

million, of which \$41.2 million consisted of food and live animals, items that will not be affected under the sanctions. This means that roughly \$85 million in export trade is at stake. The volume of exports from Syria to the United States is not much larger, totaling only \$195.7 million from January to August 2003. According to the National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce, the sanctions will affect only a few American companies that are interested in working in Syria, particularly in oil exploration and agriculture. Beyond that, few, if any, U.S. businesses are likely to suffer from the sanctions.³⁶

Nonetheless, one danger emanating from the Syria Accountability Act is that American businesses may find themselves left out of potential trade deals. Brazil's initiative to drum up more trade with Syria, as highlighted by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's visit to that country in December 2003, and the December 10, 2003, announcement by the European Commission of a new pact to develop political and trade ties with Syria will not benefit American firms.³⁷

Furthermore, sanctions aimed at keeping American or Western technology (little of which is imported by Syrians, anyway) out of Syria would be impossible to enforce. "If the Syrians need a computer they would simply drive to Beirut and get one," said a veteran U.S. diplomat, intimately familiar with the area.³⁸

Syria's thousands of miles of rugged borders with Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan are extremely porous, and the smuggling of contraband—particularly across the Turkish and Lebanese borders—is as ancient as the Bible. Passing banned items into Syria from Lebanon—especially if it was sanctioned by the Syrian government—would be further facilitated by the fact that Syrian troops still control large chunks of Lebanon.

One Washington insider with a deep knowledge of U.S.-Arab relations summarized the whole exercise: "It will be a slap on the arm."³⁹ Nonetheless, notwithstanding the limited substantive importance of the Syria Accountability Act, the loss of face for the Syrian government may provoke a hostile

response, or may further weaken Assad to the benefit of more radical elements of the Baath Party.

Conclusion

Before the war in Iraq, officials in the Bush administration, particularly those in the Department of Defense, chose mostly to ignore the advice of Arabists in the State Department who best understood the mindset of the Iraqis. As has become apparent, the postwar situation in Iraq is not turning out as the optimists had predicted; it is looking much more like what the experts feared. The American troops' welcome was extremely short-lived. Now American soldiers are finding themselves on the receiving end of attacks staged by Iraqi and foreign jihadists.

Despite the optimists' predictions, peace has not descended across the Middle East as a result of the so-called demonstration effect of American power. Progress following the Middle East Road Map, produced by the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia and intended to bring about a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, is hopelessly stalled. Given the obvious failure of the administration's policies, it would be wise to heed the counsel of those with a better understanding of the region and its complexities. Those voices urge conciliation, not conflict, with Syria.

President Bush and his advisers see things very differently. The president in his November 6 speech said, "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe, because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty."⁴⁰

The Bush administration, the president said, was pursuing a "new policy," one aimed at bringing democracy to the Arab world. The invasion and occupation of Iraq were just the beginning, "a watershed in the global democratic revolution." Bush called the operations in Iraq "a first step in a forward

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strategy of freedom in the Middle East.” “Iraqi democracy will succeed,” said the president, and “that success will send forth the news from Damascus to Tehran that freedom can be the future of every nation.”⁴¹

Enforcing the Syria Accountability Act, and adopting similarly aggressive policies elsewhere in the Middle East, will certainly send forth news to Damascus and the rest of the area, but it might not be the right message. Furthermore, a sudden regime change in Damascus might not be entirely to Washington’s liking. Given the “basic reality of Syrian society,” according to Leverett, the most plausible alternative to the current regime in Damascus would be the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴² The Baath Party is the dominant political player in Syria. A sudden collapse of the Baathists will pave the way for the Islamists to assume power, setting the stage for an Islamic republic in Syria, similar to the Iranian regime. Would that be in the best interests of the United States? Certainly not. As Leverett said, what we need are “bigger carrots and bigger sticks.”⁴³

The Syria Accountability Act will give President Bush a few more sticks, but as Leverett points out, “It will not bring change.” For that to happen, he says, “We’ve got to get a smarter policy.” He advocates a strategy of engagement with the government in Damascus, similar to the approach used with East European states, and the Soviet Union itself, during the waning days of the Cold War. American commitments to democracy made under the Helsinki process encouraged a commitment on the part of communist governments to civil rights and political reform. That, in turn, empowered groups within those closed societies to pressure their own governments to abide by the Helsinki agreement and ultimately led to a push for greater and greater freedom.⁴⁴

A smarter policy in the Middle East would similarly engage the moderate forces in Syria—and for that matter in the rest of the Arab world—in positive dialogue. Rather than impose further economic sanctions on Syria, Leverett urges that the Bush adminis-

tration lift restrictions on the Middle East Partnership Initiative that would allow money to flow to nongovernmental organizations within Syria. He similarly calls for foreign support of a microlending bank sponsored by President Assad’s wife.⁴⁵ Brink Lindsey and Daniel Griswold of the Cato Institute have similarly documented how greater economic engagement and free trade combat terrorism by encouraging the spread of democracy and political freedom. In this vein, more trade, not less, is likely to lead to favorable outcomes for U.S. security.⁴⁶

The alternative to engagement between Syria and the West is a descent into isolation that will strengthen the most radical elements of Syrian society. Those groups, not the current government of Syria, pose the real and persistent danger to our way of life.

Notes

1. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East,” news release, November 6, 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>.

2. See Marc Ginsberg, “Bashing Bashar,” *Weekly Standard*, April 28, 2003; Frank Gaffney Jr., “Who’s Next?” *Townhall.com*, April 15, 2003, <http://216.239.39.104/search?q=cache:SbD3Gu3NK6EJ:www.townhall.com/columnists/frankjgaffneyjr/fg20030415.shtml+syria,+gaffney,+&hl=en&ie=UTF-8>; and Jed Babbin, “Regime Change, Again,” *National Review Online*, November 12, 2003, <http://nation.alreview.com/script/printpage.asp?ref=/babbin/babbin200311120817.asp>.

3. Quoted in “Time to Focus on Iran—The Mother of Modern Terrorism,” Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, May 6, 2003, <http://www.jinsa.org/articles/articles.html/function/view/categoryid/1930/documentid/2012/history/3,2359,2166,1930,2012>.

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28. Flynt Leverett, "Promoting Democracy in Syria: Options for U.S. Policy," Comments at the Washington Institute, November 14, 2003, summary available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/Policywatch/policywatch2003/810.htm>.
29. Council on Foreign Relations, "Terrorism: Questions & Answers: Syria," <http://www.cfrterrorism.org> (accessed February 6, 2004).
30. M. J. Gohel and Sajjan M. Gohel, "Terrorism—Iraq: Attack on Italian Troops in Nasiriyah and the Wider Problems," Asia-Pacific Foundation report, November 13, 2003.
31. Michel Aoun, Testimony to House Committee on International Relations, September 17, 2003.
32. Byman, p. 61. The Shebaa Farms are a small parcel of land at the point where the borders of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel converge. After Israel's pullout from south Lebanon, Israel continued to occupy the farms, which it claims belonged to Syria. Syria, however, claims that they belong to Lebanon. Hezbollah also claims the farms are Lebanese territory and for a while continued to harass Israeli troops by attacking military positions on the farms.

33. Council on Foreign Relations.
34. U.S. Census Bureau, "Trade (Imports, Exports and Trade Balance) with Syria," <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5020.html>.
35. U.S. Census Bureau, "Trade (Imports, Exports and Trade Balance) with Jordan," <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5110.html#2002>.
36. Figures compiled by the National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce from U.S. Department of Commerce data.
37. On December 10, 2003, the European Commission announced a new trade pact with Syria to develop political and trade ties extending the European Union's policy of constructive engagement with countries dubbed "rogue states" by the United States. Syria was the final holdout in the 12-country Euro-Mediterranean region to sign a pact with the EU.
38. High-ranking U.S. State Department official speaking on condition of anonymity.
39. Arab businessman speaking on condition of anonymity.
40. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East."
41. Ibid.
42. Leverett.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. See, for example, Brink Lindsey, "The Trade Front: Combating Terrorism with Open Markets," Cato Trade Policy Analysis no. 24, August 5, 2003, <http://www.freetrade.org/pubs/pas/tpa-024es.html>; and Daniel T. Griswold, "Trading Tyranny for Freedom: How Open Markets Till the Soil for Democracy," Cato Trade Policy Analysis no. 26, January 6, 2004, <http://www.freetrade.org/pubs/pas/tpa-026es.html>.