

# On the Road To Damascus?

By Col. Dan Smith (Ret.) | April 22, 2003

It's about the size of North Dakota; its annual military expenditure is under \$925 million. But from all the attention it has received as the fighting in Iraq has diminished, one has the impression that Syria is a major threat to the United States.

The rhetoric starts at the top. Returning to the White House on April 13, President Bush said: "Well, Syria just needs to cooperate with us.... The Syrian government needs to cooperate with the United States and our coalition partners and not harbor any Ba'athists, any military officials, any people who need to be held to account for their tenure during what we are learning more and more about."

That same day, on CBS television's "Face the Nation," Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, answering a question on alleged Syrian assistance to Iraq, opined that Syria already was paying a price for helping Iraq: "I mean who in the world would want to invest in Syria? Who would want to go into tourism in Syria? The government's making a lot of bad mistakes, a lot of bad judgment calls in my view and they are associating with the wrong people and the effect of that hurts the Syrian people. It hurts the Syrian people because reasonable people don't want to be associated with a state that's on a terrorist list. They don't want to be associated with a country that's engaged with Hezbollah and moving terrorists down and terrorist materials, equipment, and explosives, down to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. They don't want to be associated with a country that's still occupying their neighboring country of Lebanon."

On April 14, in a joint press conference with the Kuwait Foreign Minister, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared: "[W]e are concerned that Syria has been participating in the development of weapons of mass destruction and, as the President noted, specifically on chemical weapons. And we believe, in light of this new environment, they should review their actions and their behavior, not only with respect to who gets haven in Syria and weapons of mass

destruction, but especially the support of terrorist activity." He delivered the same warning the next day at the Foreign Press Center: "We hope that Syria understands now that there is a new environment in the region with the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein, and that Syria will reconsider its policies of past years and understand that there are better choices it can make than the choices it has made in the past."

No one in the administration is talking of war—at least right now. But at the moment, while two carrier battle groups in the Persian Gulf are expected to leave this week for their home bases, neither of the two similar battlegroups located in the eastern Mediterranean are leaving. Moreover, U.S. Marines have moved north to the vicinity of the Iraqi-Syrian border.

Given all this sudden attention and military pressure, what really is the extent of the Syrian threat?

The CIA, in a report covering the first half of 2002, describes Syria as actively pursuing biological weapons, positioning itself to start a nuclear weapons program, and enhancing its existing chemical weapons program.

If this sounds familiar, it should. These were prominent among the plethora of reasons, starting in early 2002, that the Bush administration gave for its preventive war against Iraq.

What is Syria's official international treaty status with respect to weapons of mass destruction? Syria is a signatory of the 1968 Nuclear Non Proliferation (NPT) treaty and has signed but not ratified the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention. It has acceded

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to full International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) nuclear safeguards. It is one of 132 countries that are state parties to the 1925 “Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous of Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare,” but it has not signed the 1994 Chemical Weapons Convention.

Analysts concur that Syria has developed chemical weapons and attribute the development to Syria’s fear of Israeli nuclear capabilities. The nerve agents sarin and VX are most often cited. With regard to developing biological weapons, the U.S. was the first to level the charge. In 1990, then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, the current vice president, included Syria on a list of ten countries that “have, or may have, biological weapons programs.”

There are other “parallels” between the Bush administration’s justifications for war against Iraq that could be applied to Syria. Saddam Hussein invaded his neighbors in 1980 (Iran) and 1990 (Kuwait). Syria, along with Egypt and other Arab states, is usually cast as an aggressor in the 1967 Six Day War with Israel because it “initiated” multiple clashes along its Golan Heights frontier with Israel and mobilized its army, thus constituting an “imminent threat” to Israel. In 1976, two years after a virulent civil war started in Lebanon, then-Syrian President Hafez al Assad (father of the current president), with at least the tacit acquiescence of the U.S., UN, and the Arab League, sent his army to pacify the country. Some 20,000-30,000 Syrians are still in Lebanon.

Saddam Hussein employed chemical weapons to massacre Iraqi Kurds in 1988 and used his army to quell uprisings by Kurds and Marsh Arabs in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. His regime practiced pervasive repression of the Iraqi people. In 1982, reacting to an uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood against Syria’s secular Ba’ath party, then-president Assad loosed his army against the small city of Hama in central Syria. Casualty estimates run from 10,000-35,000, with most tending toward the larger figure. When it was over, the town was virtually destroyed.

Iraq harbored terrorists, including al Qaeda operatives and the head of the now-moribund Palestine Liberation Front, Abu Abbas, accused of masterminding the 1985 seizure of the Italian cruise ship “Achille Lauro” during which a U.S. citizen was killed. Saddam Hussein also gave \$25,000 to families of Palestinian suicide bombers. Syria has been on the State Department’s list of state supporters of terror since the list was drawn up in 1979 for its support of and assistance to Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah in these organizations’ fight against Israel. And Syria now stands accused of being a transit point—if not a safe haven—for the “terrorists” of the toppled Iraqi regime.

With its old, Soviet-era military equipment, Syria’s military poses no threat to the United States. Its economy is too precarious to spend large sums in any vast re-armament program. Because it is on the State Department’s list of states that support terrorism, it is under U.S. economic sanctions. Even so, legislation first proposed last year, the “Syrian Accountability Act,” is to be re-introduced in the House of Representatives. It reportedly will ban all exports from the U.S. to Syria, prohibit private investing in Syria, and impose limits on diplomatic contacts.

Among Americans, the administration consistently polled majority support for the Iraq war even though a large segment of that majority attached conditions (e.g., UN or allied support) to its support. While the U.S. failed to get UN approval for the Iraq war, it claimed support from some 49 other countries, of which only two—Britain and Australia—deployed significant numbers of combat troops. Significantly, in an April 3, 2003 CNN/Gallup/USA TODAY poll, 68% of those polled opposed war with Syria (with approximately the same percentages opposing war with Iran and North Korea). No U.S. ally in Operation Iraqi Freedom, not even Britain or Spain, supports any contemplated military action against Syria.

Unlike Iraq, Syria has cooperated with the United States on a number of issues. As already mentioned, Syria had Washington’s tacit assent in 1976 when it entered Lebanon to quell civil war. In the 1991 Gulf War, Syria contributed 17,000 troops and 300 tanks

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to the allied effort. It aligned itself with the U.S. in the “war against terrorists with global reach,” and, as Colin Powell did again this week, Syria has called for a Middle East free of all weapons of mass destruction.

In the past 18 months, the United States has militarily forced two Islamic governments from power. Afghanistan’s new central authority controls little beyond Kabul, and even there it depends on the UN-sanctioned International Security Assistance Force. The country faces growing problems with a resurgent Taliban and recalcitrant, powerful, regional warlords loathe to submit to Kabul. In Iraq, security is still elusive as sporadic fighting, looting, and other crimes continue. Basic subsistence requirements, such as water, food, power, and medical supplies, are not reaching those who need them. Bitter controversy exists over U.S. attempts to reestablish civil society and a functioning government.

In all the anti-Syrian rhetoric, there was one minor countercurrent. Secretary Powell announced he would travel to Damascus for talks with President Bashar Assad about Syria’s programs to develop weapons of mass destruction and its support for terrorist organizations. However, no date was set for the visit.

In summary, the military option has left the Arab world in disarray and Washington with enough on its hands in Iraq and Afghanistan to rethink its policy of threatening Syria with the sword of Damocles. Colin Powell is right about one thing: “we have a new situation in the region.” All the countries in the Middle East as well as the United States itself need to review their policies and behavior.

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE

Central Intelligence Agency, *Unclassified Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions*, 1 January Through 30 June 2002, April 2003. [http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/bian/bian\\_apr\\_2003.htm](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/bian/bian_apr_2003.htm)

Zuhair Diab, “Syria’s Chemical and Biological Weapons: Assessing Capabilities and Motivations,” M., *The Non-Proliferation Review*, Fall 1997 at <http://216.239.33.100/search?q=cache:kJlJyfrDSJOC:cns.miis.edu/pubs/npr/vol05/51/diab51.pdf>

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