

# Recent Concerns Raised by Bush Administration Officials Regarding Syria

By Stephen Zunes | April 14, 2003

Recent statements by top Bush administration officials have accused the Syrian government of aiding senior Iraqi officials to escape, possessing chemical weapons, and committing “hostile acts” against the U.S. by allegedly supplying military equipment, such as night-vision goggles, to the Iraqis. On April 10th, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz told Congress, “The Syrians are behaving badly. They need to be reminded of that, and if they continue, then we need to think about what our policy is with respect to a country that harbors terrorists or harbors war criminals, or was in recent times shipping things to Iraq.” People should keep in mind the following points in response to administration claims:

- Syria, despite being ruled by the Ba’ath Party, has historically been a major rival of Iraq’s Ba’ath regime. Syria was the only Arab country to back Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. It was one of the only non-monarchical Arab states to have backed the United States against Iraq during the first Gulf War. Iraq and Syria backed rival factions in Lebanon’s civil war. As a member of the United Nations Security Council, Syria voted this past November in favor of the U.S.-backed resolution 1441 that demanded full cooperation by the Baghdad government with United Nations inspectors, with the threat of severe consequences if it failed to do so. However, Syria—like most countries in the world—has strongly opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq.
- Syria’s long, porous border with Iraq has been the entry point of hundreds of volunteers from around the Arab world, many of whom are Iraqi exiles, who have come to fight what they see as the conquest of an Arab country by a Western power. There is no evidence that the Syrian government has been directly sending mercenaries or other soldiers into Iraq to fight U.S. forces. Allowing armed individuals to assist a neighboring state against an invading army is considered legitimate under international law.
- There is no evidence that Iraq has moved any weapons of mass destruction or related technology and raw materials into Syria. With open deserts, mostly cloudless days, and detailed surveillance by satellites and aircraft, the movement of such material would likely have been detected. The United Nations Monitoring and Verification Commission (UNMOVIC), empowered by the United Nations Security Council to verify the destruction of Iraq’s WMD programs, disputes Bush administration claims that such proscribed materials have made their way out of the country.
- U.S. intelligence believes that Syria has developed a relatively extensive chemical weapons program, as have Israel, Egypt, and some other Middle Eastern countries. Like Israel and Egypt, Syria has not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention and is therefore not required to rid itself of such weapons or delivery systems. Syria has called for a Weapons of Mass Destruction-free zone for the entire Middle East, while the Bush administration insists that Syria—but not America’s Israeli and Egyptian allies—disarm its chemical weapons arsenal unilaterally. Syria has never used—nor has it ever threatened to use—chemical weapons or other weapons of mass destruction.
- The Bush administration has not presented clear evidence that large numbers of Iraqi leaders have escaped to Syria. Even if they have, Syria has no legal obligation to hand them over to U.S. authorities, given that the U.S. occupation of Iraq has not been recognized by the international community. Until an internationally recognized authority in Baghdad, the International Criminal Court, or other duly-constituted body makes such an extradition request, Syria is not obliged to turn over any suspects from the former Iraqi government.
- Syria, with less than half of Iraq’s population and only a tiny fraction of Iraq’s oil resources, was never as powerful militarily as was Iraq during the height of Baghdad’s military prowess in the 1980s. Syria’s military strength has declined since that period, as a result of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, which had supplied the



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Damascus regime with large-scale military aid, including armaments, training, and other military assistance.

- According to U.S. State Department officials, the Syrian government has not been directly involved in any acts of international terrorism since the 1980s. Damascus has been the home base of a number of small and largely moribund radical Palestinian exile groups, some of which engaged in terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s.
- The United States initially supported Syria's 1976 invasion of Lebanon, which was authorized by the Arab League as a means of preventing victory by the radical Lebanese National Movement and its Palestinian allies in the civil war. Syrian forces have remained in Lebanon ever since and Syria exerts enormous political leverage over the Lebanese government, particularly regarding the country's foreign affairs. During much of Lebanon's civil war, Syria actively supported Amal, a militia based in the country's Shiite community that engaged in military campaigns against the Palestinian Al-Fatah militia, the Iranian-backed Hizbollah militia, and the Maronite Phalangist militia, among others. Since the end of the civil war in 1990, the Syrians have provided limited support to Hizbollah in its ultimately successful campaign to force Israeli occupation forces out of southern Lebanon, and is believed to continue to back the radical Shiite group's scaled-down militia today. There is still some periodic fighting between Hizbollah militiamen and Israeli occupation forces in the disputed Shebaa Farms area on the border between Lebanon and the Israeli-occupied section of southwestern Syria.
- Syria has given support over the past decade to Hizbollah, a radical Shi'ite political movement in Lebanon. Initially supported by Iran, Hizbollah was responsible for a series of terrorist attacks in the 1980s during the Lebanese civil war and the 1982-84 U.S. military intervention, which included attacks on Americans. They have since become a legally recognized Lebanese

political party and serve in the Lebanese parliament. Though Hizbollah during the past decade is believed to have since restricted its use of violence to Israeli occupation forces in southern Lebanon and in disputed border regions—which is considered legitimate under international law—the Bush administration still labels Hizbollah a terrorist organization.

- Syria has agreed to grant full diplomatic relations with Israel, demilitarize border areas, allow for international peacekeepers, and provide other security guarantees to Israel, as part of a peace agreement where Israel would withdraw from Syrian territory seized by Israeli forces in the 1967 war. A peace agreement between Israel and Syria based upon this formula came close to fruition in the late 1990s until talks broke down over a relatively minor dispute on the actual placement of the border resulting from conflicting demarcation maps from the colonial era. Since then, a right-wing Israeli government has come to power and has rejected such a peace treaty, refusing to resume negotiations.
- Syria has an authoritarian government that has been charged by reputable human rights organizations with widespread and systematic human rights violations. The government has liberalized somewhat in recent years, however, both economically and politically. While still denying its people basic democratic rights, the current level of repression by the Damascus government is less than it has been in previous decades, less than that of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and less than that of Saudi Arabia and other American allies.

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