

Statement by Assistant Secretary of State for  
Near Eastern Affairs  
William J. Burns  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

October 30, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, for the opportunity to speak about the U.S.-Syria relationship.

I think it might be useful to frame today's discussion of our relationship with Syria in the context of the four goals that drive our overall agenda in the Middle East. First, the emergence of an Iraq that is unified, stable, democratic, and prosperous. Second, the achievement of the President's vision of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security. Third, the elimination of the threat of terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. And fourth, support for homegrown efforts at economic and political reform as the best means to achieve lasting peace, prosperity and democracy in the region.

It is through this policy prism that we must view Syria's actions and draw conclusions about the course of our relationship. Unfortunately, Syria's record with regard to these four foreign policy priorities is poor. In his visit to Damascus in May, the Secretary of State spoke candidly to Syrian President Bashar Al Asad about our concerns about Syrian behavior and identified the issues that the Syrian regime needed to address in order to develop a positive and productive relationship with the United States. Secretary Powell made clear that the United States remained committed to comprehensive peace in the region, including on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks, and remained ready for an improved bilateral relationship. But he also explained that the Syrians needed to establish that they were prepared to play a constructive role in the search for regional peace before we could envision progress on these fronts. I reinforced the Secretary's message in Damascus in August.

We have been very direct with the Syrians about our concerns. The issues emphasized in the Syria Accountability Act have been reflected in our ongoing dialogue with Damascus for months now. While we have seen

some positive steps with respect to Iraq, we remain deeply concerned on other critical areas - particularly terrorism and WMD.

## **Iraq**

In the months leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Administration had two areas of particular concern with respect to Syria's relationship with the regime of Saddam Hussein: illicit oil trade and illicit transshipment of dual-use and military-related items into Iraq. Despite repeated warnings, the Asad regime allowed these actions to continue, even after the beginning of Coalition military action in Iraq. Fortunately for all concerned, decisive U.S. engagement in the early days of the conflict brought an end to these activities.

We have been clear: there is no issue of greater importance for the United States than the safety and security of U.S. and Coalition personnel in Iraq. To this end, during his May visit, the Secretary focused on the need for Syria to secure its borders with respect to both high-level figures of the former Iraqi regime who might seek safehaven in Syria, as well as those individuals who might seek to infiltrate Iraq from Syria to bring harm and instability. In addition, the Secretary noted the importance of securing former regime assets held in Syrian banks so that they might be returned to their rightful owners, the Iraqi people.

Though Syria has taken steps over the past several months to address these areas of concern, their efforts fall short of what is necessary. On the border, we have witnessed increased vigilance on the part of Syrian security forces. But the porous nature of the Syrian-Iraqi border and cross-border tribal ties mean that Syria continues to be a preferred route for those seeking to undermine Coalition efforts to establish stability and a peaceful transition to democracy in Iraq.

On the issue of former Iraqi regime assets, a joint U.S.-Iraqi forensic accounting team recently departed Damascus, where they worked closely with Syrian officials to obtain information related to the disposition of Iraqi assets in Syria. We continue to call on Syria, and nations around the world, to live up to their obligations under

UNSCR 1483 and return these funds to the Iraqi people, where they belong.

We are pleased with Syria's recent vote in support of UNSCR 1511 and its decision to attend the Iraqi donors conference in Madrid. We hope this represents a new readiness by Syria to fully support the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq.

### **Israel/Palestinians**

While the Syrian leadership publicly affirms its support for comprehensive peace in the Middle East and its desire to restart negotiations for the return of the Golan Heights, it continues to offer safehaven to Palestinian rejectionist groups whose terrorist actions undermine both progress toward President Bush's two-state vision and the aspirations of the Palestinian people. Damascus claims that the offices of HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the PFLP-GC are purely informational in nature. Such claims are simply not credible. Individuals associated with these groups continue to engage in operational activities from their Damascus base. Syria's refusal to seriously address this issue and sever ties with these terrorist organizations delays the day when Syria's own territorial claims can be addressed via negotiations.

Syria maintains an unhelpful approach in the UN Security Council, where it has sponsored unbalanced resolutions related to Israel-Palestine conflict and refused to include language condemning terrorism.

### **Terrorism and WMD**

Syria, in concert with Iran, also provides support -- including safe haven and transit for personnel and materiel between Iran and Lebanon -- to Lebanese Hizballah, another terrorist organization whose activities, particularly in South Lebanon, are a destabilizing factor in the region. Hizballah's global reach -- and the threat it could pose to our forces in Iraq -- makes it an organization of particular concern to the United States and our allies in the global war on terrorism.

With respect to Syrian cooperation against Al-Qaeda, this Administration has acknowledged that Syrian cooperation earlier in the war on terrorism was valuable and saved American lives. This cooperation, however, is not sufficient to outweigh Damascus' continued support for other terror groups.

On weapons of mass destruction, Under Secretary Bolton noted in Congressional testimony earlier this fall our concern about Syria's nuclear R&D program and the need to watch for any activity or evidence of foreign assistance that could facilitate a Syrian nuclear-weapons capability. We are aware of Syrian efforts to acquire dual-use technologies that could be applied to a nuclear weapons program. Syria is a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and has a fullscope safeguards agreement with the IAEA, but has not yet signed the Additional Protocol to its safeguards agreement. Syria has signed, but not ratified, the Biological Weapons Convention. Nevertheless, Syria is fully committed to expanding and improving its chemical and biological weapons programs, which it believes serve as a deterrent to regional adversaries. Damascus is pursuing both solid- and liquid- propellant missile programs and relies extensively on foreign assistance in these endeavors.

### **Reform**

President Asad assumed power over three years ago in an atmosphere of optimism -- a so-called "Damascus Spring." The fact that early expectations about the pace and degree of reform the new President would pursue may have been overly ambitious does not diminish the disappointment with the lack of progress to date. Efforts thus far -- including the demilitarization of Syrian public schools by ending military-style school uniforms and mandatory military summer camp, a refocusing of the ruling Ba'ath Party's role in government, and creation of private universities -- are mere "glimmers" and much remains to be done to address endemic corruption, infringement of fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression and association, and a lackluster commitment to meaningful economic reform.

In short, Mr. Chairman, while Syria has decided to work constructively with the United States in some areas,

on balance, we remain very concerned that the government in Damascus continues to exert a negative influence on several of the critical foreign-policy priorities I outlined at the beginning of my remarks. In some instances, it seems that Syria harbors the illusion that cosmetic steps will be enough to defuse our concerns. In others, there seems to be a misplaced belief in Damascus that U.S. engagement in Iraq and with the Israelis and Palestinians will prevent us from pursuing a robust agenda with Syria. Both judgments are ill-considered and fail to grasp the depth of our concerns, and those of the international community.

Until Syria shows itself committed to comprehensive peace in the region through concrete actions, it will continue to find itself at odds with the United States and increasingly isolated internationally.

The Syrian regime has some tough choices to make. It can continue to harbor and support groups devoted to terror, and engage in behavior that calls into question its commitment to regional peace and stability. Or it can act in ways that reflect new strategic realities in the region and help restore hope for a resumption of the Syrian-Israeli track, encourage the emergence of a stable Iraqi neighbor, and create a better economic future for Syria. But it can't have it both ways.

The irony we face, Mr. Chairman -- if Damascus' public statements are to be believed -- is that the U.S. and Syria share a common vision for the region: a peaceful and stable Iraq ruled by Iraqis, and a just and comprehensive peace between Arabs and Israelis. The challenge we face is in charting a course that will persuade Syria to take the necessary actions to contribute to that vision.