Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar Opening Statement for Hearing on Syria - U.S. POLICY DIRECTIONS October 30, 2003

Today, we are delighted to welcome Ambassador William Burns, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and Ambassador Cofer Black, the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, for a timely review of U.S. foreign policy toward Syria.

We also welcome our second panel: Dr. Patrick Clawson of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; Ambassador Richard Murphy of the Council on Foreign Relations; Dr. Murhaf Jouejati of the Middle East Institute, and Dr. Flynt Leverett of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

Hopes that reform could take root in Syria after the fall of Saddam Hussein have dimmed in the past few months. Instead, tensions have increased between the United States and Syria and a cycle of retaliation and revenge has overtaken and derailed possible progress in the "Road Map" to peace for Israelis and Palestinians. The Israeli retaliatory attack on an Islamic Jihad terrorist camp in Syria has underscored that the "no war and no peace" status quo in the region cannot be taken for granted.

Many experts thought that when President Bashir al-Assad replaced his father three years ago, he would adopt a more pragmatic approach to negotiations with Israel and to internal political and economic reforms. Syrian cooperation with the United States in relation to al-Qaeda terrorists held promise for cooperation in other areas. Secretary Burns noted last June in testimony that "the cooperation the Syrians have provided in their own self-interest on Al Qaeda has saved American lives."

But Syria's failure to stop terrorists groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, from using Syria as a base for training and planning suicide bombings in Israel has continued. Syria also has failed to withdraw its forces from Lebanon or open a dialog for peace. It reportedly has continued to maintain stockpiles of chemical weapons and to pursue development of lethal biological agents. Moreover, Syria is working against the U.S. and Coalition forces in Iraq by refusing to release nearly \$3 billion in assets stolen from the Iraqi people.

The Senate's discussions of the "Syria Accountability Act" have been based on the presumption that the most effective response to Syrian behavior is expanding sanctions against it. This is a natural conclusion, but Syria's presence on the State Department's list of "state sponsors of terrorism" already brings with it a number of sanctions and restrictions. More importantly, as we give the Administration additional sticks to use against Syria, we should be careful about restricting our government's flexibility in responding to diplomatic opportunities that might present themselves. Syria has shown some ability to make better choices – for example, supporting U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441 following Secretary Powell's U.N. presentation in February and voting for the more recent Resolution 1511, which calls upon all nations to support the U.S.-led effort in Iraq.

Even as we tighten restrictions on Syria, we should be emphasizing to the Syrians why it is in their interest to recalculate their approach towards the United States. Syria shares a 400-mile border with Iraq. With more than 135,000 U.S. troops deployed in Iraq, Syria needs to reconsider where its future security interests lie. This is not a threat of U.S. military action but a statement of the new reality on Syria's borders. Moreover, Syrian forces that continue to occupy Lebanon are draining the already stagnant Syrian economy while providing few positive returns. Continued Syrian occupation of Lebanon only invites further possible military action from Israel.

The Syrian leadership also must adjust to the end of its "under the counter" oil deals with Saddam Hussein. Syria must negotiate new and transparent arrangements to meet its energy needs. Syria's moribund economy will not survive without opening up to investment and trade, particularly with Iraq. Significant benefits could accrue to Syria from an economically vibrant Iraqi trading partner, increased trade with Europe and the U.S., and even possible membership in a Middle East Free Trade Agreement.

In this context, Syria may find motivation to return to the negotiating table. A deal on the Golan Heights that would provide security guarantees for Israel while respecting Syria's sovereignty could be the key to resolving a host of other problems, including Syria's occupation of Lebanon, its support of Palestinian terror groups, and its economic and political isolation. Although success of such an agreement would depend ultimately on the parties themselves, I will be interested to hear from our witnesses what the United States can and should do to promote a viable settlement.

We look forward to our witnesses' recommendations on many other issues and hope that this discussion will help inform our policy toward Syria.

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