

It's Time to Engage, Not Isolate, Syria

By Ronald Bruce St John | March 12, 2004

The newly minted Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act is a sad reminder of lessons-not-learned, almost three years into the war on terrorism. The Act calls for President Bush to impose commercial and diplomatic sanctions on Syria until certain conditions are met. These include an end to support for terrorism, withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, and a freeze on development of banned weapons. Reminiscent of the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, the Syrian version is a step backwards toward the future.

There is no argument Syria needs to evaluate many of its policies. These include support for militant Palestinian and Lebanese groups, like Hamas, Hizbollah, and Islamic Jihad, anti-Israeli factions Washington labels terrorist organizations. It should also end the occupation of Lebanon begun in 1976 and follow Libya's example and renounce unconventional weapons programs.

Charges Syria hid Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and facilitated the movement of "foreign fighters" into Iraq are more controversial. Absent hard evidence, both claims are highly debatable and must be substantiated to be believed.

Syria also needs to open its economic and political system, as recent street protests in Damascus demonstrated. But it is instructive here to remember Syria's reformers see the Bush administration's hard-line policies as counterproductive. They condemn U.S. pressure, in addition to its presence in Iraq and support for Israel, arguing they slow prospects for change at home. Spokesmen for the protestors told the Arabic television station al-Jazeera the reform campaign was a purely domestic issue in Syria.

President Bashar al-Assad took office in mid-2000 amid widespread expectations of rapid economic and political change after years of repression and stagnation. Early liberalization measures, known as the Damascus Spring, were soon curtailed as the old guard of Syrian politics reasserted itself. The question today is how to encourage the Assad government to restart internal reforms and play a more positive international role.

Learning Lessons from Libya and Vietnam

Events in Libya and Vietnam point the way.

The U.S. imposed sanctions on Libya in the mid-1970s, tightening them after 1986. Multilateral sanctions were added after 1992. Ideologues in the Bush administration argue sanctions were a major reason for policy change in Libya, but the issue is far more complicated. Qaddafi used the sanctions regimes to solidify his domestic political

position in the mid-1990s and then skillfully courted European and African support later in the decade. When U.S. officials spoke of "sanctions fatigue" at the end of the 1990s, they acknowledged diminishing international support for Libyan sanctions.

The Bush administration's claim that the Iraq war was the reason Qaddafi came clean on weapons of mass destruction is also off the mark. The timing and pace of the negotiations don't support the claim. Libya initiated a three-way dialogue with American and British officials over three years ago, just after the 9-11 attacks. Talks related to weapons of mass destruction began before the U.S. occupied Iraq. And Qaddafi agreed to fork over banned weapons before the capture of Saddam Hussein.

On the contrary, the bellicose policies of President Bush probably delayed the process. Washington found it difficult to acknowledge and reward Libyan attempts to come in from the cold because Tripoli's behavior didn't fit their rogue state model. At the very most, the Bush Doctrine, war on terrorism, and occupation of Iraq were only secondary considerations in the Libyan equation.

Vietnam is another current example of the benefits of a policy of engagement. After Saigon fell in 1975, the U.S. imposed a severe sanctions regime on Vietnam. And it took nearly two decades for us to reestablish diplomatic relations. Today, we are reaping the benefits of this policy of inclusion.

Matthew Daley, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, testified to this fact before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in mid-February 2004. Emphasizing relations between Vietnam and the U.S. have "expanded dramatically in recent years," he said Vietnam is becoming "less monolithic." "The National Assembly is no longer just a rubber stamp" and "transparency is improving." Rightly adding more needs to be done to improve human rights and freedom of speech and religion, he argued Vietnam is now less repressive than it was 10 or even 5 years ago.

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Daley went on to say “integration into the international community—through trade, interaction, high level visits, and other channels—has reinforced these positive trends and will continue to do so.” At the same time, he warned that any effort to “re-isolate” Vietnam or to “punish” it with new sanctions would be counterproductive to U.S. interests. He concluded that “our deepening economic, commercial, and assistance relationship with Vietnam promotes civil society, encourages economic reform,” and “promotes the interests of American workers, consumers, farmers, and business people.”

Repeating the Failed Policies of the Past?

Many of the issues we face today in Syria are similar to those faced in Libya and Vietnam over the past three decades. At the same time, Syria remains central to the Middle East peace process and promotion of democratic reform in the region. Consequently, it makes absolutely no sense to sideline Damascus, applying the failed policies of the past.

The tough U.S. position contrasts with that of the European Union, which announced in mid-December 2003 a breakthrough in 6-year-old talks with Syria, leading to a new economic and political cooperation pact. EU officials said the agreement allowed for continuing dialogue with Syria on weapons of mass destruction, economic reform, terrorism, and human rights.

Before the end of active fighting in Iraq in April 2003, pundits and policymakers were discussing similar action against Syria. So-called “turn-left” strategists openly advo-

cated moving from Baghdad on to Damascus. The Bush administration is now ratcheting up the pressure on Syria in an election-year effort to divert attention from failed Iraqi policies. The president’s approval of the Syria Accountability Act, together with White House talk of applying sanctions on Syria, highlights the resurrection of its regime-change policy. The problem is the administration is again going about it in all the wrong ways. It is as though the debacle in Iraq never happened.

Instead of isolating Syria internationally, the Libyan and Vietnamese experiences tell us the Bush administration should be doing the exact opposite. Washington needs to engage Damascus with a policy of inclusion, encouraging and rewarding exchange. The dispatch of veteran diplomat Margaret Scobey as the new U.S. ambassador to Syria, five months after her predecessor departed, is a welcome step. Syria’s decision to free 130 political prisoners in February 2004 is another positive move.

Syria has responded to Washington saber-rattling with a counteroffensive for peace, an initiative supported by the UN. Rebuffed by Israel and the U.S., a renewal of Israel-Syria talks, supported by key regional players, like France and the U.S., remains a promising initiative and should be thoroughly explored. A frank, constructive dialogue, which targets legitimate policies of concern, is the optimum path to the reforms clearly needed in Syria.

(Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus (www.fpif.org), has published widely on Middle Eastern issues. His latest book on the region is Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife (Penn Press, 2002).)

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