



Syria and Terrorism

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Syria's role as a state sponsor of terrorism.

There is no doubt that many past Syrian actions are in direct conflict with U.S. interests in the region and that the current posture of the Syrian government towards terrorism continues to be wholly unacceptable. As a state sponsor of terrorism, Syria has repeatedly shown an unwillingness to fundamentally change its behavior regarding support for terrorism. While we continue to have hope for eventual improvements in Syrian attitudes, policies and actions, we see little at this time to indicate that Syrian support for terrorism is diminishing.

Syria remains a security concern not just because of terrorism, but also because of its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Since Undersecretary John Bolton has recently testified on the latter, which is his area of expertise, I will focus on the former. The threat to our country posed by states who both sponsor terrorism and pursue weapons of mass destruction is one which we cannot and will not ignore.

Syria, a sponsor of numerous terrorist organizations, is a country whose actions we must follow carefully in this regard. While there is currently no information indicating that the Syrian government has transferred WMD to terrorist organizations or would permit such groups to acquire them, Syria's ties to numerous terrorist groups underlie the reasons for our continued attention.

The terrorist threat posed by Syria can best be understood by addressing three areas: border security, which is directly related to the security of our forces in Iraq; Syrian government support for Palestinian rejectionist groups; and Syrian support for Lebanese Hizbollah.

Obviously, many of you share these concerns, which is why the Syrian Accountability Act is under consideration in Congress.

Iraq

Syria took a series of hostile actions toward Coalition forces in Iraq. Syria allowed military equipment to flow into Iraq on the eve of and during the war. Syria also permitted volunteers to pass into Iraq to attack our service members during the war.

In the period following the conclusion of major military action, foreign fighters have continued to transit into Iraq from Syria. While the situation on the Syrian border has improved in recent weeks, it is still a major source of concern for us.

We see indications that the Syria-Iraq border is more secure now that it has ever been. To put the issue in proper context, in the past there was not the security need for the Syrian government to secure the border to the extent they must now do so. That is only one factor in this problem. While it is understandable that the Syrian authorities may have had initial problems in ramping up, what we found unacceptable was the manner in which the Syrians delayed taking effective action. We are cautiously optimistic that the situation will continue to improve along the border.

We also remain concerned about the possibility of anti-coalition activity being organized inside of Syrian territory. I refer you to the intelligence community for its assessment of this issue.

Palestinian terror groups:

As we have said for some time, Syria provides safehaven and material support for several Palestinian rejectionist groups, including HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command (PFLP-GC) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Abu Musa Organization (AMO), and the Popular Struggle Front (PSF). The Syrian government maintains that the offices of these groups are used solely for press purposes and play no leadership or operational role in the conduct of terrorist attacks. We reject this argument and have seen evidence that some of these offices are, in fact, used for operational purposes. Even if this were not the case, we would continue to insist that the Syrian government close these offices which maintain vocal public support for these nefarious organizations.

Syrian tolerance of Palestinian rejectionist groups' offices in their country shows a lack of commitment to support reasonable efforts toward a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Lebanese Hizbollah:

Syria continues to provide safe haven and political cover to Hizbollah in Lebanon, a group responsible for killing hundreds of Americans and numerous others in the past. Syrian support for Hizbollah continues to be a major impediment towards progress in our counterterrorism efforts. Syria allows resupply of Hizbollah from Iran via Damascus. Syria also allows wanted Hizbollah terrorists, including Imad Mugniyah, to transit Syria and find haven there. The Syrian military presence in Lebanon supports Hizbollah actions there.

Conclusion

In Syria we see a convergence of hostile rhetoric and a history of support for terrorism. Our bilateral relationship with Syria is a complex one. We share Congress' concerns with respect to Syria and have been engaged in extensive, direct dialogue with the highest levels of the Syrian government on a full range of issues – including terrorism, WMD, Lebanon and Iraq. Unfortunately, these conversations have borne little fruit in changing Syrian actions on support for terrorism. While there may have been areas of cooperation on certain counterterrorism issues between our two governments, this is not sufficient to counter our grave concern about Syria's continued support for groups such as HAMAS, PFLP-GC, PIJ, Hizbollah, and others.

It should be noted that what we ask of Syria is not unusual nor is it exceptional. We ask them to join the community of nations which reject terrorism as a political tool. We ask them to cease support for groups whose only goal is to kill and maim in the pursuit of policies which seek to destroy rather than support peace. I remain optimistic that continued engagement with Syria will one day lead to a change in Syrian behavior – a change that will allow them once again to interact with us on a normal footing. But that change must come from the Syrian government – we will judge them on their actions.

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