

## The Threat From Syria (Op-Ed)

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The Threat From Syria

By Congressman Steve Rothman (D-NJ9)

Earlier this year, I argued that Syria should be included in the "axis of evil" with Iran, North Korea, and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In the months that have passed, my concerns regarding the threat of Syria to the United States and its most trusted ally in the Middle East, the State of Israel, have only intensified.

We know, for instance, that Syria is allowing jihadists to cross its border into Iraq to kill our soldiers and foment instability. Syria also continues to support organizations on the U.S. terrorist list, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which are responsible for the slaughter of literally thousands of innocent Israeli men, women, and children. Further, we have known for many years that Syria has one of the largest stockpiles of both short-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles in the Middle East. And, Syria has allowed, if not encouraged, the placement of hundreds of additional Katyusha rockets in southern Lebanon, pointed directly at Israel, which continue to threaten not only the lives of many Israelis, but are poised to set off a regional war at any moment.

As we know, most dictators hold power as a result of the use and threat of violence, not because they are the duly chosen representatives of the people. Civil society, rule of law, and free elections in Iraq will serve as an inspiration to people throughout the Middle East to change their leadership and types of government. Thus, Basar al-Assad, the ruler of Syria, has much to lose should democracy find its way to his country. It is, therefore, not surprising that Syria continues to lead the rejectionist camp in the Arab world, which opposed the American military operation to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and which now seeks to prevent America and the world from bringing democracy and stability to Iraq. Assad in Syria, like many of the dictators in the present Middle East, views democracy in Iraq as a mortal threat to his own political survival.

The Syria Accountability Act, of which I am a cosponsor, and which now has 269 total cosponsors, calls for the U.S. to forcefully extract change from Syria through tough sanctions should Assad choose not to respond to diplomacy. Sanctions would include a ban on the export of military items and dual use goods to Syria, and a combination of two or more other sanctions, including a ban on all exports to Syria, a ban on U.S. businesses operating or investing in Syria, restrictions on travel by Syrian diplomats in the United States, a ban on Syrian aircraft overflights in the U.S., a reduction in U.S. diplomatic contacts with Syria, and a blockage of transactions in Syrian property subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

I became a cosponsor of this legislation because I believe that U.S. policy has not been effective at stopping Syria's direct and indirect role in destabilizing the Middle East or threatening America's interests. Many of us in Congress have run out of patience with Syria's double game of making small concessions, such as providing the U.S. with limited intelligence on the al-Qaeda terrorist network, while at the same time supporting terrorists working in Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel. The tough economic and political sanctions set forth in the Syria Accountability Act will provide President Bush with powerful tools to compel Syria to withdraw from its anti-American and anti-Israel behavior.

While the United States focuses its attention on Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and North Korea, it is clear that Syria, because of its location in the Middle East and its continuing efforts as the self-anointed leader of the rejectionist Arab states, is a country that also needs to be dealt with firmly. We cannot afford to let the Syrians destabilize the democratic environment we are fighting to create in Iraq, or jeopardize the security we are working to strengthen in Israel - America's most strategic ally, most trusted friend for more than 55 years, and the only democracy in the Middle East. Given Syria's refusal to cease support for terrorism, including its role as the conduit of weapons and jihadists used against Americans and Israelis, all options against Syria must be considered "on the table" at this point.

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