Syria's Response to US Engagement
~ FACT SHEET ~

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The original version of this fact sheet was released on March 15, 2010. This version includes updated information covering the March to April 2010 period. All updates are presented in bold font throughout the body of the text.

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I- US Engagement starting in 2009

1- Since January 2009, there have been multiple visits to Syria by US officials, including:
- Administration officials, namely Under Secretary of State William Burns, Special Envoy Senator George Mitchell, Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman, White House-NSC Senior Director Dan Shapiro, and Counterterrorism Coordinator Daniel Benjamin, among others.
- Members of Congress, such as Senators Judd Gregg, John Kerry, Ted Kaufman and Benjamin Cardin; and Representatives Adam Smith, Tim Walz, Alcee Hastings, Stephen Lynch, Howard Berman, at the head of several congressional delegations.
- High-Ranking military officers from US Central Command.

2- US Officials have repeatedly emphasized the importance of improved US relations with Syria, the positive role Syria can play in the region, and the need for Syria to join peace efforts.

3- On July 28, 2009, the US administration initiated steps to ease American sanctions against Syria, starting with facilitating the export of material related to information technology, telecommunication equipment and civil aviation.

4- The US lifted an advisory warning American travelers about security concerns in Syria.

5- The US is getting ready to send back its ambassador to Damascus.

6- Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Al-Miqdad was invited to Washington in October 2009 for high-level talks with US officials.

7- Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustafa has been having regular meetings at the White House, the State Department and Congress with various US officials, after 5 years of boycott.

II- Syria's response

Here is how Syria responded to the US initiatives of rapprochement:

1- Syria stated clearly that it had no intention of changing its behavior, and instead criticized US policy in the Middle East:
   - Syrian officials, such as President Bashar Assad, VP Farouk Sharaa and others in the Syrian Government affirmed repeatedly that Syria will not alter its positions, including its support to Hamas and Hezbollah, and its alliance with Iran; and that it is for the US to reconsider its policy.
   - President Bashar Assad attacked the US role in the Middle East on February 25, 2010 calling it the "*new colonization of the region.*"
   - Syrian VP Farouq Sharaa stated on December 11, 2009 that the "*US-Israel scheme in the Middle East is destined to fail*." Syrian Ambassador Imad Mustafa said on May 3, 2009 that the US should "*change its course of policy*" and "*support Hamas, for instance, like Syria does.*"
   - **In March and April 2010, Syrian President Assad continued to affirm Syria's choice of supporting Hamas and Hezbollah. *"The only way to liberate our (Arab) land is through resistance",* he said on March 28th at the Arab League summit in Libya. Then, during an interview with Al-Manar (Hezbollah TV) on March 23rd, Assad stated: *"Syria's position has been clear all along. We stand by the Resistance with no hesitation".* He added *"We, in Syria, respect and value Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah."***
   - **And in response to the recent US attempts to modify Syria's behavior, Assad retorted that *"Syria's positions are set and will not change."* And that *"sending a US Ambassador to Damascus carrying a bad US policy is worthless. The result will not be good."***

2- Syria strengthened its alliance with Iran.
   - President Assad held three summits with Iranian President Ahmadinejad; Syria and Iran signed several bilateral agreements on defense, energy, economy, trade, travel and banking; Assad defended Iran nuclear program repeatedly; and on February 25, 2010, Assad signed a "friendship pact" with Iran, while publicly ridiculing, at a news conference with Ahmadinejad, US requests to Syria to distance itself from Iran.
   - **On April 14th, President Assad stressed again in a meeting with Iran's Ambassador to Syria that *"Syria will continue developing ties with Iran in all fields",* and that he *"fully backs Iran's nuclear program."***
   - **On the other hand, Iranian National Security Council Secretary Saeed Jalili highlighted in a meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mu'allem on April 18th the fact that *Syrian-Iranian relations are at their best today after over 30 years of cooperation.***

3- Syria continued its meddling in Iraq.
   - As stated by US Military Commanders, including General David Petraeus on December 13, 2009, "*Syria is still facilitating the crossing of terrorists into Iraq*", and "*still harbors former Iraqi Baathists such as Izzat Al-Douri and Muhammad Ahmad*" who are leading the Iraqi insurgency movement.
   - In addition, Iraqi PM Nouri Al-Maliki blamed Syria directly for the Baghdad bombings of August 2009 and ordered more troops on the Syria-Iraqi borders to stop the infiltration of suicide bombers and other insurgents from Syria.
   - **On April 8th, Iraqi Baathists, Islamists and former military gathered in Damascus to launch the "Iraqi Resistance Forces" to *"combat the American occupation by all means under one leadership."* Al-sharq-al-awsat newspaper reported on the meeting and interviewed the participants who announced the upcoming creation of *a unified command for the Iraqi resistance movement outside Iraq, with advanced political and military***

structures. **It is expected that the new command of the "Iraqi Resistance Forces" will be based in Syria.**

4- Syria increased its military support to Hezbollah.

- According to Israeli and United Nations sources, Syria has provided Hezbollah throughout 2009 and in 2010 with advanced M-600 surface-to-surface missiles, SA-2 air defense system, large numbers of SA18 shoulder-fired missiles and the SS-N-26 surface-to-sea missile, all of which are highly sophisticated weaponry threatening the fragile truce in the region.
- **On March 22nd, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned that "*Hezbollah has amassed tens of thousands of rockets on Israel's northern border (in Lebanon), rockets with better guidance systems, longer range, and more destructive power.*"**
- **And on March 26th, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon voiced his "*deep concern about Hezbollah's arsenal and the continuing and illegal transfer of armaments into Lebanon's territory (from Syria).*"**

  But despite the repeated concerns expressed by the US and the UN on the growing transfer of armament from Syria to Hezbollah and its threat to regional stability, Syria increased its weapon's delivery to the Hezbollah militia.
- **"<u>The SCUD crisis:</u>"**

  During the week of April 12th, the delivery of Syrian Scud missiles to Hezbollah was reported in numerous media outlets and triggered a wave of reactions. The Scud is a long range surface-to-surface missile capable of hitting targets at almost 900 miles.

  Israel reacted forcefully to the news, and on April 14th Israeli President Shimon Peres said that *"Syria's handing over Scud missiles to Hezbollah is a major threat to Israel's security."*

  US Officials at the White House, the State Department and the US Mission at the UN condemned the action and reportedly relayed their objection to Syrian and Lebanese authorities.

  Syria, on the other hand, vehemently rejected the accusation. But Hezbollah's officials refused to deny or confirm, while recognizing their acquisition of a wide variety of long range rockets, among which SCUD is the least sophisticated.

5- Syria still harbored US-labeled terrorist groups such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).

- **And on April 13th 2010, Damascus hosted a high-profile meeting for the radical Palestinian groups, including Hamas, PFLP-GC, and other minor formations. Following the meeting, Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal warned of "*an upcoming war with Israel that could engulf the whole region*", and rejected one again "*any possibility of an understanding with the enemy (Israel).*"**

6- Syria showed no flexibility on peace efforts with Israel.

- On November 13 2009, Assad refused direct talks with Israel at a press conference during a presidential visit to Paris. On March 3, 2010, the Syrian Government opposed an Arab league proposal to Palestinian-Israeli indirect negotiations, blasted the Palestinian Authority for even considering the proposal, and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem criticized the Arab States who were behind the proposal. Then, on March 8, 2010, eight Damascus-based Palestinian groups rejected the Palestinian leadership's decision to re-start indirect talks with Israel.
- **In various interviews and statements over the last few weeks, Assad repeatedly expressed his distrust of the Israeli government, and his doubts about any chance for peace in the Middle East in the near future. He expressed his strong belief in the "*way of the resistance as being the only way for the Arabs to regain their rights.*" And at the Arab Summit**

meeting on March 28th, he rejected the Arab League proposal to support indirect Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

- **In addition, on April 13th, Syria snubbed a UN request for talks with Israel via the UN force deployed in the Golan Heights, UNDOF, to address points of friction along the border.**

7- Syria continued to delay the demarcation of its borders with Lebanon, the full formalization of its diplomatic relations with the Lebanese State, and the release of Lebanese detainees from Syrian jails.

- In addition, Syria kept transferring weapons, munitions and armed fighters to Hezbollah and to Palestinian militias into Lebanon. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon repeatedly expressed UN concerns about Syria's behavior in "*maintaining Palestinian military bases straddling the borders between Lebanon and Syria*," in "*breeching the Arms embargo*" required by the United Nations to stop the flow of military material to militias inside Lebanon, and in "*refraining from demarcating the borders with Lebanon*".
- **In March and April, Syrian officials, including President Assad, were increasingly assertive about their commitment to the Hezbollah militia, its weapons and its struggle. Assad went as far as saying in his interview with the Al-Manar TV on March 23rd that *"the way Damascus gauges Lebanese politicians is based on their closeness to Hezbollah."***
- **Also Syria insisted through its UN representative that *Syria's mentioning be removed from all UNSC Reports on Lebanon*, and went as far as demanding that *UNSCR 1559's reporting be permanently eliminated* from the work of the UN on Lebanon.**

8- Syria refused to cooperate with the IAEA in its investigation of Syrian clandestine nuclear activities, as stated by the Agency Director-General Yukiya Amano on March 1, 2010.

- **Then again, on April 6th, Syria turned down a planned IAEA inspection. The agency has been seeking access to multiple sites in Syria with no success.**
- **State Department Spokesman Phil Crowley said on April 9th that the US decided not to invite Syria to the Nuclear Security summit in Washington because *"Syria failed to cooperate with nuclear inspections"* and is *"posing significant challenges to our long-term security."***

9- Syria's human rights record further deteriorated in 2009, as mentioned in the State Department Human Rights report released March 11, 2010.

- According to the report, "the Syrian government systematically repressed its citizens. Syrian Security forces arrested and detained individuals--including activists, organizers, and other regime critics--without due process. The government violated citizens' privacy rights and imposed significant restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and travel. Violence and societal discrimination against women continued, as did sexual exploitation, increasingly aimed at Iraqi refugees, including minors. The government discriminated against minorities, particularly Kurds and Ahvazis..."
- **On March 11th, Human Rights Watch reported that: *"In the last three months, as Western officials reached out to Syria, its security services have detained numerous human rights activists, journalists, and students who tried to exercise their rights to free expression and assembly."* HRW added that *"talking to Syria without putting its rights record on the table emboldens the government to believe that it can do whatever it wants to its people, without consequence,"* and that *"A message to Syria that says 'We only care about your external affairs' is a green light for repression."***
- **Last March, Syrian security services cracked down once again on Kurdish activists arresting over 27 of them, whose fate today remains unknown.**

- **On April 17th, various demonstrations took place in front of Syrian embassies around the world including Washington and London exposing the human rights' abuses of the Syrian regime and demanding the release of the many political prisoners.**

III- Syria's obligations under US Law and UNSC Resolutions

1- The US State Department still lists Syria as a State sponsor of terrorism because of its continuing support and role as a safe haven for terrorist organizations.

2- US PUBLIC LAW 108–17 of DEC. 12, 2003 (The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act) stipulates that:
It is the policy of the United States that--
- *Syria should bear responsibility for attacks committed by Hizballah and other terrorist groups with offices, training camps, or other facilities in Syria,(…);*
- *the United States will work to deny Syria the ability to support acts of international terrorism and efforts to develop or acquire weapons of mass destruction;*
- *the Secretary of State will continue to list Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism until Syria ends its support for terrorism, including its support of Hizballah and other terrorist groups in Lebanon and its hosting of terrorist groups in Damascus, and comes into full compliance with United States law relating to terrorism(…);*
- *the full restoration of Lebanon's sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity is in the national security interest of the United States;*
- *Syria is in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (…) through its continued occupation of Lebanese territory and its encroachment upon Lebanon's political independence;*
- *Syria's acquisition of weapons of mass destruction threaten(s) the security of the Middle East and the national security interests of the United States;*
- *Syria will be held accountable for any harm to Coalition armed forces or to any United States citizen in Iraq if the government of Syria is found to be responsible due to its facilitation of terrorist activities and its shipments of military supplies to Iraq; and*
- *the United States will not provide any assistance to Syria and will oppose multilateral assistance for Syria until Syria ends all support for terrorism, withdraws its armed forces from Lebanon, and halts the development and deployment of weapons of mass destruction.*

The law imposes penalties on Syria until Syria meets all the requirements described in the text of Public Law 108-17.

3- The UN Security Council Resolutions 1559, 1680 and 1701 call for the respect of the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon, for the withdrawal of all foreign forces, and for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias; And ask all States to prevent the supply to any entity in Lebanon of military material except for the Government of Lebanon.

These Resolutions specifically request that *Syria delineates its border with Lebanon, establishes permanent diplomatic representation with Lebanon, and undertakes measures against movements of arms into Lebanese territory.*

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