

Washington imposes punitive sanctions on Syria

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In a move designed to threaten and intimidate the Middle East as a whole, the Bush administration announced a series of tough sanctions against Syria on Tuesday, claiming that the country constituted “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and the economy of the United States”.

On the face of it, Washington’s assertion is absurd. Syria is a small, impoverished country with a population of around 17 million and an estimated GDP of just over \$40 billion. Militarily, it is sandwiched between the US army of occupation in Iraq, and a belligerent American ally, Israel—both of which have carried out provocative attacks over the last year on or inside Syria’s borders.

Syria is no more a threat to the US than was Iraq prior to the US-led invasion in March 2003. Once again, Washington has cobbled together a series of unsubstantiated allegations against Damascus as the pretext for aggressive political and potentially military action. Amid the deepening crisis of its occupation of Iraq, the Bush administration is making clear that the US will brook no opposition to its plans for the economic and strategic domination of the Middle East.

High on the list of US accusations was that Syria had failed to “cooperate fully with the international community in promoting the stabilisation and reconstruction of Iraq”. Bush reiterated unproven claims that Damascus provided material aid to Baghdad prior to the US invasion and accused it of failing to hand over frozen Iraqi funds. While admitting that Syria had taken steps to close its border with Iraq, Bush declared that the country remained “a preferred transit point for foreign fighters” heading to Iraq.

The focus on Iraq is significant. The US occupation is not confronting armies of “foreign fighters” but a

popular uprising with widespread support. Desperate to stem the opposition, Washington is seeking assistance, willing or coerced, wherever it can be obtained. The US message to Damascus is that it should cut off any sources of aid to the Iraqi resistance and use its political influence to bolster the illegal US-led occupation.

As further justification, Bush cited longstanding US demands, made largely on Israel’s behalf, that Syria pull out of the Lebanon and crack down on Palestinian “terrorist” organisations based in Damascus. The US sanctions on Syria were immediately welcomed in Israel as a further show of support for the Sharon government, its murderous methods and its plans to unilaterally annex large portions of the West Bank.

To rationalise the claim that Syria constitutes an “extraordinary threat”, Washington has been compelled to concoct another pretext. Notwithstanding the fact that its brazen lies about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) have been thoroughly exposed, Bush insisted that Syria has “one of the most advanced Arab state chemical weapons capabilities” and “continues to develop an offensive biological weapons capability”. Not a shred of evidence has been provided to back these claims, which Syria has consistently denied.

The Bush administration has had Syria in its sights since coming to office in 2001. In April 2003, just a month after the US invasion of Iraq, Washington reiterated its list of accusations against the country and warned of unspecified consequences if it failed to cooperate with the US. In June, the US military provocatively opened fire on a Syrian border post during an attack on a nearby village and seized five border guards.

Last November, with bipartisan support, the US Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese

Sovereignty Restoration Act, which provided for a range of sanctions as a means of ratchetting up pressure on Damascus. Bush ratified the act in December and has repeatedly insisted Syria meet its requirements. The US measures announced this week include a ban on all trade except food and medicines; a prohibition on flights between the two countries and a freeze on the assets of any Syrians accused of involvement in terrorism or the development of WMD.

Trade between the two countries is already limited, amounting to an estimated \$300 million annually. Significantly, Washington did not impose a ban on future US investment in Syria. US oil companies, including Conoco and Chevron, have an estimated \$600 million invested in the country. The Bush administration has, however, warned that further sanctions will be imposed if Damascus did not “take serious and concrete steps” to meet US requirements.

The Syrian government has reacted with a mixture of bluster and appeasement. Prime Minister Mohammed Naji Otri criticised the sanctions as “unjust and unjustified” and declared that they “will not have any effect on Syria”. In the same breath, he appealed to Washington for dialogue, saying that the Syrian leadership had “no interest in creating problems with the American administration.”

Damascus is concerned that US political pressure will impact on the country’s other economic relations, particularly with the European Union, which accounts for some 60 percent of Syrian exports. Negotiations with the EU over a trade deal stalled last month after Britain, Germany and the Netherlands raised concerns over Syria’s alleged weapons of mass destruction.

The Syrian government is walking a fine line. Like other Arab regimes, its timid criticisms of Washington’s actions in Iraq are aimed at placating the escalating anger among its own population over the criminal character of the US occupation. At the same time, Damascus is desperate for a deal with the Bush administration to avoid punitive US economic measures and military actions.

This cowardly and opportunist approach has characterised Syria’s attitude to the US attack on Iraq from the outset. As a member of the UN Security Council, Syria voted for the November 2002 resolution that imposed a harsh new weapons inspection regime on Iraq that created the conditions for the US-led

invasion. While absenting itself from the UN vote in May 2003 to legitimise the US occupation, Damascus later issued a contemptible statement declaring support for the resolution “out of concern to improve the living conditions of the brotherly Iraqi people”.

The Bush administration’s decision to proceed with sanctions despite the Syrian regime’s cringing concessions confirms that the US will accept nothing short of complete subservience. Efforts by Syria and other Arab nations to help stabilise the US occupation of Iraq will only lay the basis for further US aggression in the future.



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