

U.S. Sanctions Syria

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President George W. Bush imposed sanctions May 11 on Syria in response to its occupation of neighboring Lebanon and allegations that it supported terrorism and was pursuing clandestine chemical and biological weapons programs. The sanctions come almost five months after Bush signed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003.

The law bans the export of military and dual-use items to Syria. In addition, it requires the president to select two additional sanctions from a list of six. Bush chose to ban all U.S. exports to Syria except food and medicine and to prohibit Syrian aircraft from U.S. airspace. This last sanction was largely symbolic, however, as there are currently no commercial flights to or from the United States by Syrian airlines. Syrian trade with the United States is estimated at only \$300 million annually.

Bush's executive order included exceptions that will permit continued trade in spare parts for commercial aircraft and communications equipment. He declined to impose other penalties that would have prevented U.S. businesses from investing or operating in Syria, as well as diplomatic sanctions that would have curtailed official U.S. contact with Syria and/or limited the movement of Syrian diplomats in the United States.

The president also imposed two additional measures that were not called for in the law. First, he directed the Department of the Treasury to freeze the assets of those Syrians that it and the State Department have determined are implicated in terrorism and other sanctioned activities. Second, he directed Treasury to limit relationships between U.S. and Syrian banks.

"Despite many months of diplomatic efforts to convince the Government of Syria to change its behavior," Bush told Congress May 11, "Syria has not taken significant, concrete steps to address the full range of U.S. concerns."

The Bush administration imposed the sanctions against Syria one month before the law required a report to Congress on the status of their implementation. However, some lawmakers had expected the sanctions to begin much earlier. In a press conference held April 29, bill co-sponsors Reps. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) complained about the delay and said that administration officials had indicated that sanctions would be imposed in February. At the press conference, Engel warned that further delays might force Congress to pass a stronger law in which "no discretion will be provided to the White House while sanctions are toughened."

To offset the impact of U.S. trade sanctions, Syria has tried to conclude negotiations with the European Union to join the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, giving the country reduced tariffs and duties and greater access to European financial markets. Talks have since stalled repeatedly because of an EU policy which ties trade agreements to nonproliferation behavior. The EU is an important trading partner for Syria, accounting for 60 percent of its total exports in 2002.

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