

# House hearings target Mideast peace process

by Our Special Correspondent

The congressional faction which refused to hear a word of evidence suggesting Syrian involvement in the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland on Dec. 21, 1988, has now discovered that Syrian President Hafez al-Assad is involved in terrorism. In July hearings, Republicans on the House International Relations Committee were in high dudgeon, demanding trade war and sanctions against the Assad regime. There were no epithets too strong for them, either against Syria, or in favor of the Netanyahu government in Israel. Their antics threaten the unleashing of unstoppable chaos in the Middle East.

The ostensible topic of the hearing was current U.S. policy toward Damascus, but Reps. Dan Burton (R-Ind.) and Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) escalated pressure on State Department officials, who are now formulating trade sanctions which will be applied against Syria and Sudan in August. Those regulations were mandated by an amendment to the anti-terrorism act which was passed in April. A critical step in the continuation of the peace talks requires Israel and Syria to arrange for an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights—a delicate process at best, which Benjamin Netanyahu wants to postpone or eliminate as a realistic goal. The bluster from the advocates of escalated trade sanctions will help create the environment that the rejectionists want.

The hearing was held while U.S. envoy Dennis Ross was in Damascus. The State Department and the White House had requested that the committee restrict itself to Syria's status as a "state sponsor" of terrorism—and keep out of the broader regional policy issues. The committee agreed, but went ahead to pummel State Department Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism Philip Wilcox. On cue, their interlocutors in Syria spoke back, from the pages of the official newspaper, *Al-Thawra*, which said, "Once again, American diplomacy leaves the region with empty hands. Ross gave no more than an impression that there is a timid move to preserve the weak pulse in the peace process." It also said, "Ross failed to build a flexible base upon which peace talks can be built."

## Weakness in U.S. Syria policy

The reality behind the controversy over negotiations with Syria, is that the Kissinger and Bush apparatus built up the "Islamic fundamentalist" armies which now represent the leverage for geopolitical games. Anyone who wants to address the origins of terrorism in the region, has to look into that, and

that inquiry begins in London, where these groups receive their financing—not in Damascus.

Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) provided a prime illustration of the dirty arrangements which previous administrations have created. In an attempt to allow Wilcox to explain current U.S. policy, Hamilton asked: "Is it accurate to say that Syria has had a policy of preventing attacks against the United States and U.S. targets by groups that are under its influence?" Wilcox answered: "I think that is an accurate statement."

Wilcox explained that although Syria has been listed as a "state sponsor" of terrorism since the 1980s, and is known to safe-house elements of Hamas, Hezbollah, and other organizations which are proxy armies in the regional conflicts, "we do not have information that Syria provides arms to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. We believe those organizations obtain their arms and explosives . . . from other sources"—such as the friends of former National Security staffer Oliver North in Iran.

Burton shouted that Wilcox was an "appeaser," a "Neville Chamberlain," and all but called him a Nazi sympathizer—while comparing himself to Winston Churchill in the House of Commons. The performance would have been comic, if it were not so hypocritical. Burton and his gaggle worked night and day to prevent any investigation into allegations of Syrian involvement in the Lockerbie incident, mainly so that they could carry on a battle with Libya and Iran—a staged fight which culminated in the sanctions legislation, co-sponsored in the Senate by Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.).

Patrick Clawson, an analyst at the National Defense University who was hired by the American Jewish Committee to push the D'Amato-Gilman sanctions, argued that the same European allies who are the targets of the sanctions against Libya and Iran would support U.S. sanctions against Syria. "There's a lot of controversy with our allies . . . about whether a country like Libya or Iran is engaged in some of the unacceptable behavior that the U.S. government alleges it's engaged in. But I don't see that kind of controversy with regard to Syria," he testified. He proposed that the U.S. drop its policy of encouraging European allies to provide aid to Syria, and suggested that "we could also discourage U.S. oil firms from investing in Syria. Assad remains dependent on the \$4 billion a year in oil that's produced in Syria. And while most of this is from European firms, there are some American companies that have been involved in the past, and that have been leaving Syria."

The statement is disingenuous—it is really the policy which Netanyahu's cheerleaders want written into the regulations limiting trade with Syria, Sudan, and other nations on the "state sponsors" list, which the State Department issues in August. If those regulations are not strong enough, there is an amendment by Rep. Bill McCollum (R-Fla.) which will impose sanctions by statute. No financial transaction will be permitted with any country on that list. This measure has been sent to the Senate, and will be debated in September.