



Obama Renews Sanctions on Syria

"We continue to have serious concerns about Syria's actions," said State Department spokesman Robert Wood at a [May 8 press conference](#), referring to Syria's interference in Iraq and Lebanon and its support for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. "We need to see concrete steps from the Syrian government to move in another direction," Wood told reporters.



A few days earlier, Wood had explained that it was part of President Obama's strategy to use Syria to moderate Hamas and Hezbollah. Responding to a reporter's question at a [May 4 press conference](#), he said:

Well, we'd like to see Syria change the behavior of these two groups. We've already stated what our position is with regard to sitting down with Hamas and Hezbollah, which is also a terrorist organization, needs to renounce violence and be a productive player in the region. These two groups have not. We call on Syria to use its influence to make these two groups play a much more - play a constructive role in the region. As I said, up until now they haven't. They know what they need to do, and we hope Syria will use its influence on these two group.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who has been attempting to craft a more moderate image of his regime for Western consumption, may have spoiled things by inviting Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Damascus at this critical juncture. Ahmadinejad met with leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both of which have headquarters in Damascus. Al-Assad is the son of Hafez al-Assad, the communist dictator who ruled Syria from 1971 to 2000 as one of the Soviet Union's most loyal allies. Bashar al-Assad, who has adopted some of the trappings of Islam, continues to rule through his father's communist Baath Party, continues to support the same terrorist groups, and continues the same close relations with Iran and Russia (both of which continue to supply him with arms, explosives, and military/terrorist trainers).

Ahmadinejad and al-Assad jointly announced their continued support for the "Palestinian resistance," as represented by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This came at the same time that militant Hamas leader [Khaled Meshaal was reelected](#) in Damascus to head the Hamas Political Bureau for another four years.

Apparently Ahmadinejad and al-Assad just couldn't contain themselves. That is fortunate for us, since two of Obama's top apparatchiks, Jeffrey Feltman, the State Department's Middle East envoy, and White House assistant Daniel Shapiro, were in Damascus trying to close a deal with al-Assad. It was their second diplomatic run to Syria since March. Obama had put normalizing relations with Syria on the fast track immediately after his election, sending his adviser, Robert Malley, to Syria in November of last year to begin the process. Now, it appears that plan may be sidetracked — for a while, anyway.

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