

# Troubled Engagement

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Jan 25, 2011

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## The United States has an ambassador in Syria for the first time in nearly six years. Now what?

**O**n Jan. 16, Amb. Robert Ford stepped off a plane in Damascus -- and right into a diplomatic crisis in Lebanon. The news that Hezbollah and its allies, which are supported by Syria and Iran, have secured the votes to elect a friendly Lebanese prime minister will no doubt be on the top of Ford's agenda as Washington struggles to rein in Hezbollah's growing influence.

Ford's arrival marks the first time a U.S. ambassador has set foot in Syria since Washington withdrew its last envoy in February 2005 following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Relations between the two countries, while never friendly, have been dismal ever since.

With the Syrian-Israeli peace track largely moribund, Ford will likely spend much of his time in Damascus delivering demarches about recent discouraging developments in Syria's policies toward its neighbors. The recent Lebanon crisis, where Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime has worked aggressively to empower the United States' adversaries, is a prime example of the many challenges that Ford will face.

The bill of indictment against Syria is lengthy. In Lebanon, Damascus has helped Hezbollah orchestrate the collapse of Saad Hariri's government and choke off the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which was established in 2006 by the U.N. Security Council to bring Rafik Hariri's killers to justice. On Oct. 3, the Assad regime issued arrest warrants for 33 people, including Lebanese figures close to Hariri, and accused them of engineering false evidence implicating Syria. Damascus also failed to convince Hezbollah to compromise during its ultimately fruitless dialogue with Saudi Arabia over the last year.

Syria has also halted cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) investigation into its nuclear activities. It not only refused IAEA investigators access to the undeclared nuclear reactor in northern Syria destroyed by Israel in September 2007, but has stopped cooperating on inspections at its declared research reactor outside

Damascus as well. Foreign fighters have also continued to flow from Syria to Iraq, despite a recent improvement in relations between the two countries. Last, but certainly not least, Syria's draconian crackdown on opposition activists has intensified even as U.S. engagement with the Assad regime has deepened.

Ford's success will ultimately depend on Washington's ability to devise a strategy that deals effectively with Syria's bad behavior while leaving the door open for future peace talks with Israel (hope springs eternal). Thus far, the State Department has been reticent to articulate such a plan, despite a request by Republican senators to do so. Although some have chalked the matter up to partisan bickering, the simple fact is that the United States has really only ever based its policy on "peace processing" or "pressuring" the Assad regime. It has never really done both at the same time.

If any U.S. diplomat can pull this off, it's Ford. As deputy chief of mission in Iraq, he earned a reputation as a skilled diplomat buttressed by a firm command of the Arabic language. His biggest obstacle in Damascus, however, will likely be lack of time. Ford was only able to take up his job due to a recess appointment issued by President Barack Obama; the Senate needs to confirm him before the end of the year if he is to remain at his post. And unless the Assad regime makes major conciliatory gestures, it's hard to imagine Republican senators dropping their opposition.

Making diplomatic progress with Syria is hard work. Unlike during the 1990s, when Washington last actively pursued Syria-Israel talks, U.S.-Syria policy is now a matter of public interest by virtue of the 2003 Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act. The act not only outlines specific changes in Syrian behavior that must take place before U.S. sanctions on Damascus are lifted -- it also requires that the Obama administration regularly report to Congress on Syrian behavior. This severely constrains the administration's ability to conduct the secret diplomacy that Damascus covets.

Ford will also find a canny adversary in Assad, who has survived international isolation by pursuing a policy of diplomatic engagement even as he has aggressively pressured his adversaries through assassinations, support for terrorism, and nuclear proliferation.

Such ruthless flexibility is the way politics is played in the Levant. Washington has promised repeatedly that a U.S. ambassador in Damascus would be delivering tough messages and outlining negative inducements if Syrian policies didn't change. Now, after two years of unproductive high-level engagement with Damascus, it's time for Washington to think hard about what sticks it can use with Assad and employ them in tandem with increased dialogue. Only when Washington learns to beat Assad at his own game can it hope to make progress in what promises to be a long and complicated engagement with Damascus.

*Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](http://www.chicagoreviewpress.com/catalog/showBook.cfm?ISBN=1569768439) (<http://www.chicagoreviewpress.com/catalog/showBook.cfm?ISBN=1569768439>). ❖*

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