

U.S. Stepping Up Engagement with Syria

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

Feb 19, 2010

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

Five years ago this month, Washington withdrew its ambassador to Damascus to protest the Assad regime's presumed role in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. For the State Department, which instinctively believes in the power of diplomacy, yanking its top diplomat was equivalent to the nuclear option. But after decades of Syrian targeting of Americans and Washington's regional allies, the Hariri slaying proved a bridge too far.

On Tuesday, President Obama nominated Robert Stephen Ford to be the new ambassador to Syria. Also this week, the State Department's top career diplomat -- Undersecretary of State William Burns -- met with Syrian dictator Bashar Assad. Two years ago, Barack Obama campaigned for president on a pledge to reestablish dialogue with Damascus, so these moves are not surprising. Yet it's unclear what's driving the administration's elevation of contacts at this time.

After all, the Obama administration's year of "engaging" with the Assad regime has yielded few, if any, achievements. While Syrian facilitation of insurgents into Iraq has slowed, top U.S. generals and senior Iraqi officials say the problem remains. At the same time, an increasing body of evidence suggests that Damascus has provided the terrorist organization Hezbollah with a new generation of sophisticated weaponry -- including advanced anti-aircraft weapons -- that changes the equation along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

Meanwhile, just weeks ago, it was reported that North Korea had resumed its shipment of sensitive military technology to Syria, the first such transfer since Israel bombed the Assad regime's nuclear weapons facility in 2007.

Taken together, persistent Syrian support for terrorism and development of weapons of mass destruction does not suggest a regime trying to improve its bilateral relationship with Washington. Still, under increasing economic pressures and facing a severe drought, Damascus no doubt is hoping to get relief from long-standing U.S. economic sanctions. But given Syria's behavior, removal of these sanctions in the near future is unlikely.

So Assad instead is again floating the idea of negotiations with Israel as the preferred avenue to full rapprochement with Washington. In this context, it's been widely rumored that Assad has assured George Mitchell, U.S. envoy to the Mideast, that he's ready to discuss a deal with Israel. While this message of peace may be appealing, it's not particularly credible.

In early February, after a war of words that led many commentators to speculate that Israel and Syria were on the verge of war, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his country was open to resuming negotiations with Syria. But in recent years, the Israeli consensus position on any deal with Syria has changed. Israel is no longer seeking a land-for-peace agreement, but a deal based on land for strategic reorientation. That would require a demonstrable Syrian shift away from its 30-year strategic ally, Iran.

Assad rejected this formula *prima facie*, making a deal unlikely. Indeed, Assad's defense minister last week said Syria would continue to support Iran in the face of international pressure over Tehran's nuclear program.

Not surprisingly, without changes in Syrian behavior and/or a peace deal with Israel, there is little hope for a significant improvement in the U.S.-Syrian bilateral dynamic.

Despite the frustrations of the past year, the Obama administration this week appears to be doubling down on Damascus. The policy is driven by the desire to loosen, if not sever, the ties between Damascus and Tehran and thereby increase pressure on the clerical regime.

Syria is already saying the U.S. gambit will fail. Meanwhile, the Assad regime is declaring a victory. The re-posting of a U.S. envoy represents nothing less than the confirmation of the centrality of Syria in U.S. Middle East policy, a misreading that could embolden the longtime rogue regime.

The one potential benefit of a senior U.S. diplomat returning to Damascus is said to be a *quid pro quo* involving the imminent departure from Washington of Syria's longtime ambassador, Imad Moustapha. Since 2000, Moustapha has served as chief regime propagandist and spinmeister, and his incessant leaking and mischaracterizations of U.S. policy initiatives have proved a complicating factor in the relationship.

While the latest U.S. diplomatic moves may improve communication between Washington and Damascus, absent progress on terrorism or the Middle East peace process, the new U.S. ambassador in Syria will have little of substance to discuss with the Assad regime. Instead, like his predecessor, the ambassador will be occupied with delivering diplomatic demarches -- government nasty-grams -- conveying Washington's ongoing disappointment with Damascus.

David Schenker is director of the [Program in Arab Politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?)

Los Angeles Times

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)