

## Who Decides on the Levant in Washington?

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Last week, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Feisal Mekdad travelled to Washington for meetings at the State Department and White House. While the Obama administration extended the invitation some time ago, the timing of Mekdad's arrival seemed more than mere coincidence. Mekdad landed in Washington on Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, a time when most Jews -- including those employed by the US government -- were in synagogue. For the Syrians, the fortuitous timing of the trip practically assured the absence of senior American Jewish officials from meetings at Foggy Bottom.

Whether the timing was planned or happenstance, it highlighted an ongoing theme in Washington's diplomatic engagement with Damascus. Since the inauguration of the Obama administration, in an effort to improve its diplomatic position, the Assad regime has sought to determine its American interlocutors. Indeed, from day-one, Damascus expressed concern with the appointment of the National Security Council's senior Middle East adviser, Daniel Shapiro, and the assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, two allegedly Jewish "hardliners" on Syria. (While Shapiro is, in fact, Jewish, Feltman is a Protestant).

Later, the Syrians sought to sideline Feltman and Shapiro in hopes of conducting talks with the administration's peace envoy George Mitchell, who Damascus presumably believed would be more sympathetic. More recently, Syria's ambassador in Washington, Imad Mustafa, suggested during an interview with the London-based Saudi daily Ash-Sharq al-Awsat that President Barak Obama himself would determine Washington's Syria policy by "using his executive authority to freeze the implementation of the important clauses in the sanctions laws [affecting Syria]."

Despite Syrian efforts to shape the environment of the engagement, regardless of the individual interlocutor, the Obama administration has presented a unified front in its representations to Damascus. While the Syrians have succeeded to some extent in blurring the three tracks of the United States' engagement -- the Iraqi border security initiative led by US Central Command, the Lebanon and Syrian-support-for-terrorism basket headed by Feltman, and Mitchell's peace process track -- Damascus has not driven a wedge in what has been, to date, a fairly coherent policy.

Today, while there appears to be some minor divergence of opinion in the Obama administration regarding Syria, there is more agreement than disagreement on the nature of the Assad regime and what is required to move ahead. The policy is based on the widespread administration consensus that despite conciliatory US gestures, until now Damascus has done precious little to reciprocate. Eight months on, the administration -- which came to office on a platform of engagement -- has been chastened.

Notwithstanding Syrian efforts to shuffle the deck, the key administration actors focused on Lebanon and Syria today remain Feltman, Shapiro and Mitchell. Dennis Ross, who months ago shifted from the State Department to the NSC, does not appear to be actively involved in the Lebanon-Syria portfolio. Within the military, the commander of Central Command, General David Petraeus, and, to a lesser extent, the top commander in Iraq, General Raymond Odierno, have also emerged as key voices on Syria. Despite philosophical divergences in approach -- Petraeus, for example, is said to favor senior-level talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad -- the administration is under no illusions as to the chances for success.

Indeed, even as Washington largely avoided comment on the August 19, 2009 bombings in Baghdad that the Iraqi government blamed on Damascus, Odierno pointedly noted on September 15 that "Syria continues to allow the facilitation of foreign fighters through Syria that both come into Iraq as well as, I believe, into Afghanistan."

After eight months of engagement, with scant progress to report, skepticism about the utility of the process appears to be reaching the highest levels of the Obama administration. This growing frustration of senior State Department and NSC officials was reflected in an August interview in An-Nahar with a "high-ranking US official" -- believed by many to have been Jeffrey Feltman -- who told the Lebanese daily: "The Syrians are mistaken if they think that their relations with us will not be affected as a result of what they are doing in Lebanon ... President Obama wants to improve relations with Syria, but it would be impossible if Syria and its friends in Lebanon continue to cripple the democratic institutions."

Even if Syria does allow a cabinet to be formed in Beirut, however, administration concerns about Damascus' ongoing arming of Hizbullah -- reportedly with unprecedented advanced weaponry -- and Syria's less-than-helpful support for Hamas and opposition to a Palestinian national-unity government, will continue to complicate a rapprochement. Absent any real progress in the bilateral relationship, 2010 -- when the Hariri tribunal is likely to issue its first indictments -- could be a tough year for Damascus.

No doubt, in the Middle East -- particularly in Lebanon -- much will be read into the optics of Faisal Mekdad's Washington visit. While he is the highest-level Syrian visitor in five years, much of the meetings reportedly focused on sanctions. Indeed, a June article in the Kuwaiti daily Al-Rai al-Aam reported that during their last meeting, Mitchell spent an hour and a half explaining the intricacies of the sanctions to Assad.

Based on the lack of progress on all the key issues, however, significant US concessions to Damascus -- such as the lifting of these sanctions -- remain off the table. Meanwhile, at least in part due to the lack of bilateral US-Syria progress, Washington is showing little interest in pursuing a mediation role in Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

As with Iran, the Obama administration engagement initiative with Syria has yet to bear fruit. In spite of the Assad regime's efforts to divide and conquer Washington's Syria policymakers, for the time being at least, the administration continues to read from the same sheet of music. Stuck with Feltman, Shapiro, and Mitchell, and a coordinated US policy on Syria, Damascus, if it truly wants to improve relations with Washington, may actually have to change some of its policies.

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