

# Will Mitchell's Trip Bypass Damascus?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**U**. S. special envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell is scheduled to visit Israel, the Palestinian territories, Egypt, the Persian Gulf, and North Africa this week. Conspicuously absent from his itinerary is Damascus. Despite a Syrian public relations campaign designed to exploit Washington's opening gestures with Syria as a major policy change, the exclusion of Damascus from the envoy's agenda demonstrates that the Obama administration continues to pursue cautious and critical engagement with the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad.

### The Syrian-U.S. Expectations Gap

Following the November 2006 Iraq Study Group's recommendation to engage Syria and Iran, the Asad regime hired a British public relations firm to develop a strategy targeting the international community. In January 2007 Abdulsalam Haykal -- a businessman close to the Syrian regime -- and Syrian historian and political commentator Sami Moubayed launched *Forward Magazine* (Syria), a monthly English-language glossy periodical that, according to its website, looks at "the bright side of things." The magazine featured a number of articles by or interviews with Syrian ambassador to the United States Imad Moustapha that were intensely critical of U.S. Syria policy.

In the wake of U.S. speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's April 2007 visit to Damascus, a stark gap in expectations emerged between Damascus and Washington. The Asad regime demanded talks on "the horizon of issues" and a "package deal" on "comprehensive peace" that would solve some bilateral issues at the expense of others. In Washington, however, policymakers sought progress on all issues, most notably Syria's support for terrorism, efforts to undermine Lebanon's sovereignty, an investigation into the murder of former Lebanese premier Rafik al-Hariri, and increasing evidence of extensive Syrian facilitation of foreign fighters into Iraq. Many also doubted that the Bush administration or its successor would conduct immediate high-profile engagement with Damascus, pointing to the poor track record of U.S. officials engaging Asad and Damascus's new and unexpected maximalist demands for engagement.

Moubayed was soon tapped by the regime to serve on the "U.S.-Syria Working Group" -- a "Track Two" dialogue between Syrians and Americans organized by the U.S.-based Search for Common Ground. After Syria announced in May 2008 that it was involved in indirect peace talks with Israel, Moubayed and two other Syrians visited Washington the following July to exchange views with a number of policy think tanks and former U.S. officials with the goal of narrowing the gap between the two positions.

Not only did Syria's expectations remain unrealistically high, but it was clear Damascus anticipated an early visit from the next U.S. president as well. Two days following Barack Obama's election, Moubayed penned the article "Abu Hussein's Invitation to Damascus," which outlined ten things Obama must do by inauguration for Syria to receive him "as a guest of honor in Damascus, the way it did with Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton." Some of the Syrian points, including appointing a U.S. ambassador to Damascus, helping Syria deal with Iraqi refugees in Syria, and sponsoring Syria's indirect peace talks with Israel, were well known to U.S. officials. Unexpected, however, were further demands that Washington lift U.S. sanctions on Syria, recognize "that no problems can be solved in the Middle East without Syria," and "help Syria combat Islamic fundamentalism." While Moubayed later insisted his article only reflected his own views, journalists and analysts widely regarded them as reflecting those of the Syrian regime.

### No Grand Gestures

Following Obama's inauguration on January 20, Syria's public relations campaign stalled. In addition to existing concerns with Damascus, U.S. officials were particularly concerned by Syria's refusal to comply with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) requests for further inspections at al-Kibar -- the clandestine nuclear facility destroyed by Israel in September 2007, where IAEA inspectors found traces of uranium and graphite. So instead of the kind of grand gesture Syria wanted, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dispatched Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Jeffrey Feltman on February 26 for talks with Moustapha. In the meeting, Feltman raised the issues of Syria's "support to terrorist groups and networks, acquisition of nuclear and nonconventional weaponry, interference in Lebanon, and worsening human rights situation."

Regime spokesmen immediately attacked Feltman for using the "language of the neocons." Following the meeting, however, both sides labeled the talks "constructive," leading to another round of discussions in Damascus on March 7 between Feltman and National Security Council Middle East director Daniel Shapiro and Syrian foreign minister Walid Mouallem. Following the talks, Feltman announced that both sides had found "a lot of common ground" and that instead of setting "benchmarks" for Damascus, each side was watching the future "choices" of the other.

Two days later, Asad stepped into the fray. In the ensuing twenty-three days, he gave six interviews to international media. But rather than dealing with the issues discussed during Feltman and Shapiro's visit, Asad targeted Israel, offering it only a cold peace, blaming outgoing Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert for the failure of recent indirect Syrian-Israeli negotiations, and refusing to talk about cutting ties with Hizballah, Hamas, and Tehran. In another interview, Asad implied he had been asked to mediate between Washington and Tehran. Then, in his first-ever email interview with an American journalist, Asad told the New Yorker's Sy Hersh that he not only sought U.S. mediation with Israel, he also wanted direct contact with President Obama.

In the latest installment of the campaign, Moustapha told the Washington Times editorial board on April 7 that the United States had signaled a sea change in its relations with Syria, claiming that relations with Washington are suddenly so amicable that U.S. officials said, "We will never ask you to kick [Hamas politburo leader] Khaled Meshaal out of Damascus." He also predicted that Mitchell would soon visit the Syrian capital.

### Washington's Cautious and Critical Approach

Contrary to Moustapha's predictions, no such policy shift has taken place. Instead, Washington continues to utilize a step-by-step pragmatic approach to engaging Damascus. Unlike most other countries on the U.S. State Sponsors of Terrorism list, the United States and Syria have diplomatic relations and functioning embassies. Following the Feltman-Shapiro meeting, Washington is now watching Damascus's choices on the issues discussed. Thus far there has been some diplomatic motion on Lebanon and Iraq. On March 24, Syria officially appointed its first-ever ambassador to Lebanon (who has yet to be posted). Syria's foreign minister, Mouallem, visited Baghdad the following day for talks on border security and committed Syria to "whatever help is necessary" for a successful withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Washington is now waiting for Syria to follow through on both commitments. On the ground in

Damascus, Syria has allowed the reopening of the American Language Center, an English-language institute affiliated with the embassy that was closed along with the embassy's cultural center and the American school following the October 29 U.S. raid on terrorist bases near the eastern Syrian town of al-Soukkariya.

In other areas of U.S. concern, however, progress has yet to be made. Syria continues to refuse IAEA requests for further inspections or to talk about its worsening human rights situation. Finally, Damascus has yet to evince its much-trumpeted ability to rein in weapons smuggling by Hamas or to bring the group into a Palestinian unity government with Fatah.

### Dilemmas Reveal Intentions

With Damascus unfortunately more interested in public relations than in addressing outstanding bilateral issues, Washington's step-by-step approach seems set to continue. In the short term, a key test to see if Syria is capable of cooperating with Washington will be Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections, which U.S. policymakers are watching closely to see if the poll will take place without Syrian interference or assassinations. Concerning Iraq, Washington is waiting to determine whether Syria can follow through on its promises to stop the flow of jihadi fighters across its borders.

In the long term, however, Washington's biggest challenge will be to devise a strategy that puts the Syrian regime into policy dilemmas that will reveal whether it will eventually conclude and implement a peace treaty with Israel and realign itself away from Iran. By making clear agreements with the United States and implementing them, Assad has the opportunity to rebuild trust with Washington. Only when this is accomplished will grand presidential gestures to Damascus become a viable option in Washington's competitive policy environment.

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