

Washington Balances Syrian Engagement with Commitment to Lebanese Allies

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

This week, the State Department's top Middle East diplomat is slated to meet with Syrian ambassador to the United States Imad Mustapha in what will be the Obama administration's first talks with a senior Syrian official and Mustapha's highest-level U.S. contact in years. The meeting comes amid a flurry of activity regarding U.S.-Syrian-Lebanese relations, including high-level congressional visits to Syria, a strongly worded White House statement in support of Beirut, and shifts in U.S. policies widely interpreted as a diplomatic overture to Damascus.

Background

In the aftermath of the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, the Bush administration withdrew its ambassador from Damascus. A month later, 1.5 million Lebanese protested in Beirut against the Syrian regime's suspected role in the assassination. One month after that, Syria -- which had occupied Lebanon for nearly thirty years -- withdrew its forces, and in the subsequent elections the pro-West, anti-Syrian March 14 coalition was brought to power. Responding to this "Cedar Revolution," the U.S. government provided Lebanon with unprecedented levels of economic, military, and diplomatic support.

Lebanon's March 14 coalition evinced uneasiness about Barack Obama's pledges both during the campaign and as president-elect to renew diplomatic engagement with Damascus. Some were concerned that the new administration would be tempted to sacrifice its Lebanese allies' interests -- for example, by compromising on the international tribunal prosecuting the Hariri murder -- in return for Syrian cooperation on pressing regional matters like Iraq or the peace process. Given longstanding Lebanese concerns about the durability of Washington's commitment to Lebanon, the ruling coalition is nervous about what it sees as signs of wavering.

In an effort to reassure Beirut and to mark the fourth anniversary of the Hariri assassination, the president and secretary of state issued statements in support of Lebanese sovereignty -- codeword for March 14 -- and the administration pledged an additional \$6 million in funding for the international tribunal. Then, on February 14, Secretary of State Clinton and CENTCOM commander Gen. David Petraeus phoned son of the slain former prime minister and prominent March 14 leader Saad Hariri.

Recent Congressional Engagement with Syria

In Lebanon, where March 14's electoral success depends to a great extent on the perception of ongoing U.S. backing, the recent visits by American legislators to Damascus were viewed with great interest. Four legislators met with President Bashar al-Asad in February, including most prominently, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) and House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman (D-CA).

At the behest of the administration, prior to traveling to Syria, Senator Kerry visited Lebanon, where he met with President Suleiman and Saad Hariri. During his public statement following the Hariri meeting, Kerry reassured Beirut and lowered expectations in Damascus. He reiterated U.S. support for Lebanon and emphasized that the Hariri tribunal was "independent from any issues of discussion between the U.S. and Syria." The purpose of discussions with Syria, Kerry said, was to "test whether or not this is a moment for change. . . . We are looking for actions."

By all accounts, March 14 officials were pleased with Kerry's message in Beirut. Senator Kerry's Damascus press conference received lower marks particularly his optimistic statement about areas of potential cooperation with Syria. Also problematic was Kerry's opinion that Damascus might be a positive force in helping to foster a Palestinian national unity government between Hamas and Fatah, a suggestion that undermines diplomatic efforts currently underway by Washington's allies in Cairo.

Preliminary Administration Moves toward Engagement

Since the election of President Obama, President al-Asad has adopted a conciliatory tone toward Washington, setting the stage for the Obama administration's first diplomatic overtures to Damascus. In early February, it was reported that the Department of Commerce approved a license to sell Boeing 747 parts to Syria. The jets had been grounded for years due to lack of parts. While safety provisions could have allowed the transfer of these parts years ago, the sales were held up due to U.S. concerns that these civilian aircraft were utilized to transport military materiel from states like Iran and North Korea to Syria and Hizballah.

The agreement to sell airplane parts represents a reversal of U.S. policy and a conciliatory gesture toward Damascus. At the same time, the Treasury Department authorized the transfer of \$500,000 to a Syrian charity associated with President al-Asad's wife, a move widely interpreted as a softening of U.S.

sanctions. Taken together, these steps constitute a U.S. opening to Damascus, a significant diplomatic overture that should have promoted a reciprocal step by Syria.

Al-Asad's Answer

Instead of welcoming the unmistakable moves by Washington as a positive sign and taking steps to repair the bilateral relationship, Damascus pocketed the unilateral U.S. concessions and looked to parlay the moves into further diplomatic gains. On the announcement of the 747 spare parts license approval, for example, Syrian Minister of Transportation Yarub Badr told the Syrian news agency that he hoped this step would "be positively reflected in the ongoing negotiations with Airbus," suggesting that in light of the shift in Washington, Europe -- which has until now declined to sell airplanes to Syria -- might now agree to do so.

Perhaps more telling than the response to changes in Washington's policies, however, was the regime's reaction to the latest congressional visits. On February 19, the day after Senator Kerry's remarks in Beirut -- where he also requested Syrian assistance with "the disarming of Hizballah" -- the Syrian government-controlled press attacked Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), who had visited Damascus the week before. The Syrian daily al-Watan criticized Cardin for "fail[ing] to distinguish between terrorism and resistance," asking, "Are these groups [Hamas and Hizballah] terrorists? We think not." The newspaper also took Cardin to task for looking to "drive a wedge between Iran and Syria." If the bilateral relationship is to improve, the article stated, "Changes in Washington, and not Damascus, must occur." If Senator Kerry and Congressmen Berman "harbor[ed] similar views," it continued, they "should not bother traveling to Damascus."

Getting the Balance Right

The Obama administration's initial approach toward engaging with Syria has been somewhat haphazard, but ultimately cautious, careful both to preserve U.S. equities in Lebanon and to discourage irrational exuberance in Damascus. The approach makes sense, particularly given Syria's longstanding unhelpful policies and the lack of any discernible change in Syrian behavior in response to U.S. overtures. But it will be increasingly difficult to walk this line. On the one hand, Washington does not want to undermine the March 14 coalition as the June Lebanese elections approach. On the other hand, it will prove hard to generate momentum with Syria unless the United States sends an ambassador and/or senior administration officials to Damascus.

The choice of Jeffrey Feltman to conduct the Obama administration's first official meeting with Ambassador Mustapha was inspired. A former U.S. ambassador to Lebanon and the current acting assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Feltman represented Washington in Beirut during the 2005 Cedar Revolution and is well regarded by March 14 officials. At the same time, his performance in Beirut -- he openly supported March 14 vis-a-vis Hizballah -- earned him no fans in Damascus: in 2007, Syrian foreign minister Walid Mouallem said that Feltman "should leave [Lebanon]" and offered to send him on a paid vacation to Hawaii.

Feltman's designation as Washington's interlocutor sets the right tone in Beirut and Damascus. It reassures Beirut of Washington's ongoing commitment and communicates to Damascus that the improvements in the bilateral relationship depend on substantive changes in Syrian behavior.

The Obama administration faces an enormous challenge in balancing the priorities of simultaneously supporting the March 14 coalition and engaging Damascus. In both cases, the stakes are high. A Hizballah victory in the Lebanese elections would represent a strategic setback for regional moderates at the hands of Iran and Syria. Conversely, if the administration could somehow engineer the strategic realignment of Syria -- away from Iran toward the peace camp -- it would prove a real blow to regional militants. As Washington's engagement with Syria moves forward, balancing should remain an integral element of the strategy. No doubt, the approach will be difficult to sustain, but the preliminary signs at least suggest that the Obama administration understands the stakes and is taking steps to mitigate the potentially harmful consequences of the policy.

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