

Give Abboud the Boot:

Why Does Syria Need Two Ambassadors in Washington?

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It's been two years since the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri caused the United States to withdraw its ambassador from Syria. But even as the U.S. embassy in Damascus continues to function without its senior diplomat, Syria maintains not one but two ambassadors to Washington. Officially, Syrian president Bashar Assad's top diplomat in the United States is Ambassador Imad Moustapha. Assad's second, unofficial -- but reliably pro-Syria -- envoy is Lebanon's ambassador to Washington, Farid Abboud.

The absence of a Lebanese ambassador to Washington who is accountable to his own government reflects the ongoing Syrian influence in Lebanon and the fractious nature of Lebanese politics. While the Bush administration has adapted to this dynamic by finding alternative interlocutors to Abboud, the situation remains problematic for Lebanon.

Abboud has been in Washington for eight years, a remarkable tenure given the typical ambassadorial rotation lasts only four years. He was appointed by the pro-Syria Lebanese president Emile Lahoud -- who himself was chosen by Assad. And despite the tectonic shift in Lebanese politics away from Syria following the assassination of Hariri, the unabashedly pro-Syria, pro-Hezbollah Abboud remains ensconced in the embassy. The anti-Syrian Lebanese government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora has thus far been incapable of dislodging him.

Not that they haven't tried. Last summer, during the Hezbollah-Israel war, Abboud was recalled to Beirut for condoning Hezbollah's attacks on CNN. Instead of returning to Beirut with his tail between his legs, Abboud stayed in Washington. Lebanon's strife-ridden parliamentary politics have allowed Abboud to remain ensconced in the ambassador's residence.

Abboud has been, in effect, protected by the ongoing power struggle between Hezbollah and the so-called March 14 forces, the anti-Syria alliance led by Siniora. In November 2006, after Hezbollah cabinet ministers -- including Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh -- withdrew from the government in a gambit to attain more political power, Siniora tried to appoint 58 new ambassadors, all of whom had already been vetted. The move was blocked by pro-Syria president Lahoud, who refused to approve the new diplomats in the absence of the Hezbollah foreign minister's

consent. Months later, the deadlock continues, and Abboud's title remains.

But Abboud's ability to function as a diplomat has been seriously eroded. Essentially, Abboud has spent the last six years of the Bush administration largely isolated, having little or no contact with executive branch personnel. Since 2003 Abboud has met with only one senior administration official -- then Deputy Secretary of Defense-designate Gordon England -- but the meeting happened only because of negligence on the part of one of England's junior staffers. As a matter of policy, the administration has treated Abboud as a Syrian official and has studiously avoided contact.

The ongoing quarantine of Abboud has thrust the Lebanese deputy chief of mission Carla Jazzar -- a longtime foreign-service professional unaffiliated with Syria and not beholden to President Lahoud -- to the forefront of Lebanese diplomacy in Washington. Much to the chagrin of Abboud, for the past few years Jazzar has surfaced as the de facto charge d'affaires, the primary senior Lebanese diplomatic contact with the U.S. government. And by all accounts, she has proven an outstanding interlocutor. Indeed, many had hoped that after Abboud, Jazzar would be appointed ambassador.

In October, however, it was announced that Antoine Shadid, a veteran Lebanese professional diplomat, would replace Abboud. (Abboud has been reassigned to Tunisia.) Rumors abound as to when Shadid will finally be posted, but given the crisis in Lebanon, it can't be soon enough. Jazzar has done a fine job representing her country both with the U.S. government and in the media, but the uncertain dynamic of a deputy chief of mission loyal to Lebanon and a lame duck ambassador beholden to Syria has not advanced Lebanon's interests in the United States.

The challenges facing the pro-democracy government of Prime Minister Siniora are extremely complex and daunting. Making matters worse is the fact that Beirut's senior representative in Washington neither represents nor advocates on behalf of the elected government in Lebanon. While the Bush administration has long considered Abboud a problem, it has avoided taking any steps to expel him, lest unintended and potentially damaging consequences ensue.

The Bush administration has committed itself to supporting the Siniora government in its struggle against Syria and Iran. And in this context, it would be helpful if the senior Lebanese diplomat in the United States also truly represented and supported his government in Lebanon. Given the ongoing crisis in Lebanon, Washington and Beirut are looking forward to Abboud's eventual departure. His eviction notice is long overdue.

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