

The Good Old Days

Written by {ga=sami-moubayed}
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United States President Barack Obama's decision to name Robert Ford, as the new ambassador to Syria, to fill a post that has been vacant since 2005 has been warmly received by the Syrians.

Although his appointment still needs senate approval, Ford is considered a strong Arabist at the State Department, having previously represented his government in Algeria in 2006-2008 and more recently in Iraq.

Once he arrives in Damascus, probably by mid-2010, the Johns Hopkins-educated diplomat will have a multitude of issues piled on his desk, all related to improving bilateral relations between his country and Syria. The Syrians want to return to the pre-January 20, 2001, relations with Washington; the day before George W. Bush was sworn in as the 43rd president of the United States.

This means engagement on critical issues related to the Middle East, serious efforts to restore the Golan Heights to Syria, no sanctions, and no media campaign against Damascus.

One thing that will make Ford's mission to Syria somewhat easier is that unlike Bush, Obama is no longer interested in severing Syria's relations with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and Iran. On the contrary, he sees them as a blessing in disguise, given Syria's heavyweight influence with these groups, meaning that it can, when the need arises, influence their behavior.

That has already been evident on a number of occasions: when Damascus secured the release of a French national under arrest in Iran last summer; and when it talked Hamas into accepting the Arab peace initiative and allow U.S. mediation in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process once the siege on Gaza is lifted. Syrian cooperation in the provincial elections of 2009 led to an impressive turnout for Iraqi Sunni voters, even in the hotbed of the Sunni insurgency, and Washington hopes for similar engagement during the elections next March.

Many expect Ford to jumpstart Syrian-Israeli peace talks, though this seems increasingly unlikely from a Syrian perspective due to the hardline policies of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the war rhetoric that has been fired back and forth between top Syrian and Israeli officials over the past week.

Syrian-Israeli peace talks are not impossible, however, if Ford channels all the right messages and Obama manages to pull the right strings with Netanyahu by applying needed pressure for him to accept Turkish mediation and return to talks, either directly or indirectly, with the Syrians. The Syrians have been saying that peace is close to impossible with this current Israeli government, but if any breakthrough were to emerge, it would need to be a collective Arab one,

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under the auspices of the U.S. and the international community.

Robert Ford will be the 16th U.S. ambassador to Syria since diplomatic relations were exchanged in 1942. His immediate predecessor Margaret Scobey went to Damascus in December 2003 but had her tenure terminated by the Bush White House in 2005, right after the assassination of Lebanon's former prime minister Rafik al-Hariri.

If he were to dig into the archives of the U.S. Embassy and the Department of State, he would find piles of documents dating to the 1940s that undoubtedly would help him better understand the country and its inhabitants, where his country went wrong, and where it succeeded in moving bilateral relations forward.

One notable U.S. diplomat who served in Syria was the first envoy, George Wadsworth, from New York, who supported the Syrians when they achieved independence from the French in 1946, lobbying with his government to back Syrian claims for independence or face the danger of transforming Syria into a "vehicle for Nazi penetration". Like Wadsworth, Ford knows the region well, speaks the language and understands Arab grievances vis-a-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Wadsworth was brilliant at hearing out Syrian worries, not only dictating American concerns, a trait shared by some of his notable successors. These included Richard Murphy (1974-1978), Edward Djerejian (1988-1991) and Christopher Ross (1991-1998). These men are still remembered with fond words by Syrian officials and the public alike, and today all of them are still welcome to Damascus.

They oversaw Syrian-U.S. relations during the difficult Lebanese civil war, the 1991 Gulf War, the Madrid peace process and all peace talks throughout the 1990s. During this time they developed a sincere affection for the country, along with respect for its leadership and citizens, and this was clearly reciprocated by both the Syrian government and the public alike.

Ford should read well into the careers of two diplomats in particular to learn from their mistakes - James Keeley (1947-1950) and James S. Moose (1952-1957), under whom relations hit rock bottom.

Keeley famously meddled in Syria's domestic affairs, telling politicians what to do and not to do, supporting a military coup that led to the toppling of Syria's democratic and civilian government for the sake of passing American oil pipelines from Saudi Arabia through Syrian territory and signing an armistice agreement with Israel.

Moose did a poor job; when trying to curb communist influence in Syria he went along with a plan to topple the Syrian government, which led to the expulsion of three U.S. diplomats from the embassy in Damascus in the summer of 1957. That in turn led to the withdrawal of the Syrian ambassador to the U.S., Farid Zayn al-Din.

Under Moose, a scenario took place that was very similar to the one of 2005-2008. Fearing the rise of communist influence in Syria and given the fact that both the British and French

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embassies were already closed (due to the Suez War of 1956), the U.S. began to support ambitious officers in the Syrian army, encouraging them to seize power by force. When that failed, although the Central Intelligence Agency's top man Kermit Roosevelt was in charge of what came to be known as the Stone Affair (named after the U.S. diplomat Howard Stone), the U.S. accused Syria of supporting terrorist acts in Lebanon, which was strongly denied by Damascus.

A series of explosions rocked Beirut and the U.S. accused Syria of all the mayhem in its tiny neighbor. It began encouraging neighboring states into meddling in Syrian domestics, under Article 51 of the UN Charter: self-defense. Under the Dwight Eisenhower administration the two countries verged on war. The Sixth Fleet was brought to the Mediterranean, Turkish troops were amassed on the border with Syria and two Russian warships, the cruiser Zhdanov and destroyer Svobodny, were brought into the port of Latakia to serve as a deterrent to the U.S. Army. During this time, because of U.S. policies, then-Syrian president Shukri al-Quwatli - for the first time ever in bilateral relations - described the U.S. as an "enemy."

In reading of that difficult period of Syrian-U.S. relations, ambassador Ford will realize that, generally, success for any American ambassador depends on two things. One is the amount of engagement over the occupied Golan Heights, which was, and remains, the highest priority for Syria. Another is the degree of respect shown towards the host country, its people, systems and national aspirations.

The fact that Ford represents a president who wants to engage with Damascus and use Syria's influence to help solve issues in the region will certainly help Ford. Although Ford will surely be well briefed and given plenty of instructions by his superiors at the State Department, it would be wise for him to read the papers and memos of men like Murphy, Djerejian and Ross, and follow in their footsteps, given that they are still around to give professional and friendly advice and tell their stories of how it was on the road between Damascus and Washington in their times.

Sami Moubayed is editor-in-chief of Forward Magazine and an author of the forthcoming book "The Damascus Tea Party: Syrian-US Relations 1919-1959." This article appeared in Asia Times entitled, "Syria delighted with new US envoy."