

**U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations**  
**Chairman John F. Kerry**  
**Opening Statement For Hearing On Nomination Hearing For U.S. Ambassador to Syria**  
**March 16, 2010**

**Chairman Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing For U.S. Ambassador To Syria**

Washington, DC— Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) today delivered the following opening statement at the nomination hearing for Robert Ford, President Obama's nominee to be Ambassador to Syria.

*The full text of Chairman Kerry's statement as prepared is below:*

I have long argued that America's national security interests are well served by engaging with Syria. The Administration's decision to send an Ambassador to Damascus marks an important step forward in that process.

I'm pleased to see the Administration has nominated a strong candidate to take on this challenging assignment. After twenty-one years in the Foreign Service, Robert Ford served as Ambassador to Algeria from 2006 to 2008.

Since then, he has served with distinction as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Iraq.

His success in this new post will be vital. From Iran to Iraq and Lebanon to the Arab- Israeli peace process, just about every major American security interest in the Middle East has a Syrian dimension.

Clearly, we have serious issues with Syria. While the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq has diminished, more remains to be done to shut down the pipeline.

Large numbers of deadly weapons continue to transit across Syria's still un-demarcated borders with Lebanon: Hezbollah now has more—and more dangerous—rockets than it did before the 2006 war. Last month, the IAEA determined that the Syrians have not been cooperative with their investigation into the suspected nuclear site at al-Kibar. Journalists, students, and human rights activists have been arrested. And Syria's recent public rebuke of Secretary Clinton and embrace of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hassan Nasrallah, and the leaders of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the PFLP-GC sent a very negative signal about the current mood in Damascus.

Syria has its own list of requests, topped by the removal of U.S. sanctions and the return of the Golan Heights.

Syrians will argue that they have taken positive steps, including sending an Ambassador to Beirut, continuing to host hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees, and agreeing to trilateral talks with the US and Iraq on border security – discussions that I was involved in personally – that have not been reciprocated. It's fair to say that we have a great deal to discuss.

So President Obama did the right thing by deciding to send an ambassador to Syria to make our case at the highest levels. Some have pointed to our disagreements as a reason not to pursue this nomination, but I believe just the opposite is true: We need an Ambassador now because we are at such a pivotal moment. Remember: Diplomacy is not a prize, it is something we do to advance our interests – and we should not fear forceful, principled engagement.

The real challenge is not deciding whether to engage – it will be in finding a viable path to improved relations.

I believe that with confident, carefully calibrated diplomacy, we can show Damascus what it stands to gain by moderating its behavior – and what it stands to lose by going in the other direction.

To succeed, we must present Damascus with a clear choice and a vision of a different future. I've met with President Assad on several occasions and shared my concerns. I've also heard his.

And I believe he understands that his country's long-term interests – and his own as the head of a secular government– are not well served by aligning Syria with a revolutionary Shiite regime in Iran and its terrorist clients.

To the contrary, Syria would be on much firmer footing if it instead builds meaningful ties with America, its Arab neighbors, and the West.

President Assad understands the economic stakes as well.

Syria's oil wells are beginning to run dry just as the half of its population under 18 begins to enter the marketplace – an economic strain exacerbated by corruption, budget deficits, and years of drought. Syria clearly wants to join the global economy, and that will require closer ties with the West.

All of us should be realistic about what engagement can accomplish. A Syrian realignment won't come quickly or easily, and let me clear: It will never come at the expense of Lebanon's sovereignty.

But if we do succeed, it could be transformative in galvanizing the Arab-Israeli peace process and dramatically improving the situation for our friends in Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, and the West Bank. In short, this presents us with an opportunity to change the strategic landscape in the Middle East that we cannot afford to ignore.

Most immediately, we have much to gain by reinvigorating Syrian-Israeli diplomacy. Today the parties have reached a public impasse.

President Assad wants Israel to make what's called the "deposit" – promising that a successful deal will deliver the Golan Heights to Syria. Prime Minister Netanyahu considers that an unacceptable precondition. We need to explore the role the United States can play in bringing the parties together.

History shows that progress is possible. Remember, in the 1990s, two Israeli Prime Ministers came close to an agreement with Syria. And just over a year ago, Prime Minister Olmert and President Assad made real progress towards direct talks in negotiations brokered by Turkey.

Going forward, our challenge is to translate this potential into tangible progress measured in changed behavior. Over time, splitting the difference will not be acceptable. And Syria may not make the choices we seek. But the only way to determine whether Syria will decide on a different future is to put real, clear choices on the table.

Ambassador Ford, you come highly recommended. I look forward to your testimony and, once you are confirmed, to working closely with you.

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