

**STATEMENT OF ROBERT FORD  
AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC  
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
MARCH 16, 2010**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today. I am grateful for the trust and confidence placed in me by President Obama and Secretary Clinton in nominating me to serve as United States Ambassador to the Syrian Arab Republic.

President Obama has placed a priority on achieving certain national security objectives, such as regional peace. The President's desire to have a sustained and principled dialogue with the Syrian government at the ambassadorial level does not promise fast results, but it is in our national interest and will move us closer to achieving our goals.

One thing I have learned in my work in places like Egypt, Algeria and Iraq is that when we talk to governments that take stances contrary to our interests, we must be firm and also realistic about the progress we can expect to make in a short time. The diplomacy of engagement is a long-term investment.

I have also seen how hard it is for bad news to travel up to the top in the region's bureaucracies. So far in this Administration's effort to engage the Syrian government, we have only circumvented that bureaucratic problem and spoken directly to the top Syrian leadership when high-level American delegations have visited Damascus, such as the February visit of Under Secretary Burns.

Especially at a time when the Middle East confronts increasing regional tensions, we must be talking every day and every week with top-level officials who have influence and decision-making authority. They need to hear directly from us, not from the media or third-party intermediaries, what are our bottom lines and the potential costs to them – and to the region – of their miscalculations. If confirmed, unfiltered straight talk with the Syrian government will be my mission priority.

And I am under no illusions as to the nature of the challenge I will face if confirmed; during my more than four years in Iraq, I saw first-hand the tragic aftermath of terrorist car bombings perpetrated by foreign fighter networks that infiltrated suicide bombers from Damascus airport over the Syrian border and into Iraq.

The Syrian government has also been a steadfast supporter of terrorist groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hizballah for more than 20 years. Without significant changes in its policy, Syria will remain on our list of State Sponsors of

Terrorism for the foreseeable future. And while we and our friends in the region are working to mitigate Iran's influence, Syria has helped promote Iran's destabilizing policies.

The United States wants a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. The Syrians say they want the same. The United States wants a sovereign, stable, secure Iraq. The Syrians say they do too. The United States wants the Lebanese government to exercise sovereign authority over all of its territory. The Syrians say that they accept Lebanese sovereignty. However, when it comes to implementation of steps to achieve these common goals, our two governments remain far apart.

While we are working to develop the regional conditions conducive for re-launching Middle East peace talks, Syria threatens to play its traditional role as a spoiler.

While we are building the capacities of the Iraqi security forces, the Syrian government hosts networks of both former Iraqi Baathists, hard-line Islamists and even TV broadcasters who work to undermine the Iraqi state.

While we are strengthening the institutions of the sovereign Lebanese government and its defense forces, the Syrian President prominently hosted the leader of Hizballah at a state dinner with the Iranian president.

And while we urge countries in the region to comply with their obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and their obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, the Syrians have so far refused to provide the IAEA access and information necessary to resolve the concerns about Syria's nuclear activities.

Moreover, there are major human rights problems in Syria, such as the arrest and torture of human rights activists.

I do not think that the Syrians will change their policies quickly. Finding avenues of cooperation with Syria will be a step-by-step process that will require patience and steady commitment to our principles.

And the Syrians could be very helpful if they perceive how their interests are best served by working with us and the international community.

For example, if we are to protect the investment we have made in the future of Iraq, we must work with the Syrian government to make clear its stake in the security and stability of Iraq. Certainly Syria and Iraq could have significant economic relations.

If we are to succeed in stabilizing the region, we must persuade Syria that neither Iran nor Hizballah share Syria's long-term strategic interest in a comprehensive Middle East peace. Indeed, we must see whether the Syrians are truly interested in negotiating that peace agreement with Israel.

Moreover, Syria now hosts the largest population of Iraqi refugees in the world. Indeed, many of Iraq's ancient, and once thriving Christian population now resides in Syria. The Syrian government has been generous in allowing them access to healthcare and education, but the durable solution for most is repatriation and the refugees won't go home unless Iraq is stable and secure. Syria is also host to over 460,000 Palestinian refugees, whose basic services are provided by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East, with generous support from the Syrian government. If confirmed, I will seek additional ways where we can cooperate with Syria to help these refugees; in the case of the Iraqi refugees, many of them could come from Syria to the United States for resettlement.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, as a former Peace Corps volunteer and a long-time observer of the region, I would note that Syria has the same challenge as many of the other countries in the region. Its youth bubble – 80% of Syrians are under the age of 30 -- faces rising unemployment even as they enjoy easy access to satellite television and the internet. Many of them hope that Syria will become a fuller part of the Mediterranean and broader international community. So do we. If confirmed, I will represent the United States not only to the Syrian government, but to the nearly 20 million Syrians whose opinions of our country are distorted on a daily basis by political propaganda. And I will regularly find ways to push for improvements in the human rights situation in Syria and also to show our high-level support for those Syrians working for the promotion of basic human rights in Syria.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to address the Committee. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.