

Dick Lugar

U.S. Senator for Indiana

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Opening Statement for Nomination Hearing for Ambassador to Syria

U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Dick Lugar made the following statement at today's hearing.

I join in welcoming Ambassador Ford back to the Committee. During the last several years, you have accepted some of the most difficult assignments a diplomat could undertake. As the Chairman noted, you are currently the Deputy Chief of Mission in Iraq. But you also headed the Political Section in Iraq for three years, and as I understand it, even as DCM to Bahrain and Ambassador to Algiers, you were sometimes posted in Iraq on extended temporary duty. The nominee's long record of skilled diplomatic service to our country clearly qualifies him for this post.

We open our hearing with the understanding that we are discussing not just the nominee's qualifications, but also policy decisions related to Syria and our diplomatic representation in that country. Syria has been on the state sponsors of terrorism list since it was originally published in December 1979. Despite recent U.S. overtures, relations with Damascus remain deeply strained. Just two weeks ago, in a joint press conference with the President of Iran, Syrian President Bashar Assad made inflammatory remarks that raise the question whether the regime is prepared to engage at any level with the United States.

More concretely, Syrian actions frequently have been hostile to U.S. interests. Damascus has been unhelpful to stability in Iraq and the safety of our troops there. It has supported Hamas and Hezbollah. It has harbored Iraqi Baathists, and possibly Al Qaeda-in-Iraq operatives. It has long suppressed basic freedoms and human rights and obstructed IAEA investigations. Even cooperation on much smaller issues that are in Syria's own interest has been rare. For example, Syria has refused to grant U.S. immigration officials visas to interview and process thousands of Iraqis living in Syria who are seeking resettlement in the United States.

Given these factors, we should temper expectations about what can be achieved diplomatically with the Syrians in the short term. Nevertheless, declining to post Ambassadors to countries, though sometimes necessary, rarely serves U.S. interests for long. In this case, Syria is an unavoidable factor in the Middle East peace equation. As we have noted, its actions affect U.S. foreign policy goals in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and other neighboring states. It is understandable that as the Administration tries to make progress on several fronts in the Middle East, it is proposing sending an Ambassador to Damascus for the first time since 2005.

I am interested to hear from our nominee about how the Administration plans to address the set of problems presented by Syrian activities and how improving relations with Syria fits into a broader diplomatic campaign to achieve U.S. goals in the Middle East. I would also like to hear from the nominee whether the Administration believes there are diplomatic risks and costs to returning an Ambassador to Damascus, and if so, how the State Department is planning to mitigate them.

I look forward to the insights of the distinguished nominee.

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