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BEFORE THE

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SECOND SESSION

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CONTENTS

	Page
Dodd, Hon. Christopher J., U.S. Senator from Connecticut, prepared statement	13
Ford, Hon. Robert Stephen, nominee to be Ambassador to the Syrian Arab Republic	5
Prepared statement	7
Responses to questions submitted for the record by the following Senators:	
John F. Kerry	23
Richard G. Lugar	26
Russell D. Feingold	30
Barbara Boxer	32
Kirsten E. Gillibrand	33
Kerry, Hon. John F., U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, opening statement	1
Lugar, Hon. Richard G., U.S. Senator from Indiana, opening statement	3

NOMINATION

TUESDAY, MARCH 16, 2010

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

Hon. Robert Stephen Ford, of Maryland, to be Ambassador to the
Syrian Arab Republic

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:30 a.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John F. Kerry (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Present: Senators Kerry, Dodd, Cardin, Casey, Webb, Kaufman, Lugar, and Isakson.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN F. KERRY, U.S. SENATOR FROM MASSACHUSETTS

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing will come to order. Thank you all for joining us this morning.

I have long argued that America's national security interests are well served by engaging with Syria. And to that end, I have made a number of journeys there over the course of the last 4 or 5 years in efforts to explore the possibilities.

The administration's decision to send an Ambassador to Damascus marks an important step forward in that process. I am pleased to see that the administration has nominated a strong candidate to take on this challenging assignment. After 21 years in the Foreign Service, Robert Ford served as Ambassador to Algeria from 2006 to 2008. And 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 and Iraq to Lebanon and 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 still to be resolved.

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 undemarcated borders with Lebanon. Hezbollah now has more—and more dangerous—rockets than it did before the 2006 war. Last month, the director general of 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. At best, it was bad optics.

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 United States and Iraq on border security—discussions that I was personally involved in—and they would argue that those steps have not been reciprocated by the United States. It is 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, my friends, 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 is to find 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 have met with President Assad on several occasions. And I have shared these concerns, and I have heard his. And frankly, we have had a good dialogue, and I saw many possibilities for joint cooperation and other kinds of efforts between us.

I believe he understands that his country's long-term interests, and his own as the head of a secular government—something that he prizes—that those long-term interests 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 rest of the world.

All of us should be realistic about what engagement can accomplish. A Syrian realignment won't come automatically or overnight. But 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 moment presents us with an opportunity to change the strategic landscape in the Middle East, and that is an effort 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 is called “the deposit,” promising that a successful deal will deliver the Golan Heights to Syria. Prime Minister Netanyahu, on the other hand, considers that an unacceptable precondition. So we need to explore the role that the United States can play in bringing the parties together to bridge this divide.

History shows that progress is not just a pipe dream. Progress is possible. Remember, in the 1990s, two Israeli Prime Ministers came very close to an agreement with Syria. And just over a year ago, Prime Minister Olmert and President Assad made real progress toward 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 that we think may be in its best interests. But the only way to determine whether Syria will decide on a different future is to put real, clear choices on the table, and having an ambassador there on a daily basis to engage in that dialogue enhances our ability to do that.

Ambassador Ford, you come highly recommended. We admire the job that you have been doing in Iraq enormously, and I think you will bring just the right talents to this task. Once you are confirmed, we look forward to working closely with you.

Senator Lugar.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD G. LUGAR,
U.S. SENATOR FROM INDIANA**

Senator LUGAR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I join with you in welcoming Ambassador Ford back to our 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 3 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, Mr. Chairman, 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 of 1979. Despite recent United States overtures, relations with Damascus remain deeply strained. Just 2 weeks ago, in a joint press conference with the President of Iran, Syrian President Bashar Assad made inflammatory remarks that raised 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 United States 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 United States immigration officials visas to interview and to 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 United States interests for long. In this case, Syria is an unavoidable factor in the Middle East peace equation. As we have noted, its actions affect United States 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 to send an ambassador to Damascus for the first time since 2005.

I am interested to hear from the nominee about how the administration plans to address the set of problems presented by Syrian activities and how improving relations with Syria fits a broader diplomatic campaign to achieve United States goals in the Middle East. And I would also like to hear 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.

For these many reasons, we all look forward to the insights of the distinguished nominee, and we are privileged to have you before us this morning.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Senator Lugar.

Ambassador Ford, we welcome you, as I said. And your full statement will be placed in the record as if read in full. If you want to summarize, then we will have some time—

Senator CARDIN. Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Cardin.

Senator CARDIN. Could I just interrupt for one moment because I am not going to be able to stay for the full presentation. I have another hearing. In addition to Mr. Ford's incredible professional career, he is from Maryland. And I just want you to know that we are very proud of another Marylander before our committee and fully recommend him for confirmation.

Second, let me point out his wife, Alison, is stationed in Rabat, in Morocco. So this is a career family that has served our Nation very well. It is nice to have Mr. Ford before the committee.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Cardin, for those comments. We appreciate them very, very much, and I know the Ambassador does.

Mr. Ambassador.

STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT STEPHEN FORD, OF MARYLAND, TO BE AMBASSADOR TO THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Ambassador FORD. Mr. Chairman, Senators Lugar, Dodd, and Cardin, it is really an honor to appear before you today.

I am very grateful for the trust and the confidence placed in me by President Obama and Secretary Clinton in nominating me to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Chairman, I have submitted a longer written statement for the record, and so, if it is OK with you, I would like to just make some brief remarks to the committee?

The CHAIRMAN. We appreciate it. Thank you.

Ambassador FORD. Yes. The President's desire to have a sustained and principled dialogue with the Syrian Government at the ambassadorial level is in our national interest, and it should move us closer to achieving our goals in Syria and in the region.

Let me reiterate that returning an ambassador to Syria would not be a reward to Syria, nor would it mark a change in the fundamentals of our concerns with that important country. Rather, it would mark a change in the way we try to secure our national interests in Syria. And Syria has its own interests in Iraq, in Lebanon, and in the Middle East peace process.

Thus, returning an Ambassador would mark a change in how we try to persuade, how we try to press Syria about where Syria's true interests are best found.

As President Obama said in his speech at Cairo University, the United States should commit itself to an effort, a sustained effort to find common ground. But the President also said that we should not ignore sources of tension. Instead, we have to confront those tensions squarely.

Especially at a time when the Middle East confronts increasing tensions, we should be talking every day and every week with top-level officials who have influence and authority in Syria. They need to hear directly from us, not from the media and not from third-party countries, what American calculations and American thinking are and what could be the potential costs to Syria of their miscalculations.

If confirmed, unfiltered, straight talk with the Syrian Government will be my mission priority. And if confirmed, I have as major issue priorities the following, Mr. Chairman.

First, getting Syria to be helpful in stabilizing Iraq. In addition, getting Syria to stop helping terrorist groups and to be more respectful of Lebanese sovereignty. In addition, securing Syrian support for the peace process and securing Syrian cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency. And finally, encouraging greater respect of human rights in Syria.

I am under no illusions as to how big a challenge this will be. I served for more than 4 years in Iraq, and I have seen firsthand the tragic aftermath of terrorist car bombs perpetrated by foreign fighter networks that infiltrated suicide bombers from Damascus airport into Iraq.

On the subject of Iraq, let me be clear that I would press the Syrians to adapt their policies, and they have an interest in doing so. They have an interest in a sovereign, secure, and stable Iraq. Nota-

bly, Syria and Iraq could establish economic ties that would be mutually beneficial for both countries.

I would also like to underline, as you did, Mr. Chairman, that our policy of intensified dialogue with Syria will not come at the expense of any other state in the region, including Lebanon. The United States is firm in its commitment to Lebanon's sovereignty and stability. We want Syria also to respect Lebanese sovereignty and stability.

In recent weeks, we have seen sharp rhetorical exchanges between Hezbollah and our friends in Israel, and even the Syrians have joined in, in some cases. We do not see how it is in Syria's interest for new fighting to break out in Lebanon, fighting that could escalate and even drag Syria in itself.

Moreover, we will maintain sanctions on Syria as long as it supports terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. Thus, if confirmed, there is much for me to discuss urgently with the Syrians about Lebanon and about Syrian actions in support of terrorist groups.

Connected to this Lebanon situation, Mr. Chairman, is another priority—securing Syrian support for our Middle East peace efforts. You know how hard our special envoy, Senator Mitchell, is working in this regard. Our policy is clear. We seek a just and comprehensive peace, a peace that would be in the interest of our friends in Israel and in the interest of our friends in the Arab region and the broader international community.

We have been urging the Syrians to support our efforts to restart negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. And in addition, Senator Mitchell and his team have been exploring ways to restart negotiations between Israel and Syria. For the past 16 years, the Syrian Government has said a peace agreement could be in its interests, and we want to foster movement in that direction.

Mr. Chairman, another big issue is Syria's nuclear program, where we in the international community have serious concerns. Syria has not cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors since June 2008, despite repeated IAEA requests. The latest IAEA report has raised big questions, and if I am confirmed, I would expect to press the Syrians hard on this issue.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, the aspirations of people in the Middle East for dignity, economic opportunity, and respect for their human rights are dear to me personally and professionally. I first went to the Arab region as a Peace Corps Volunteer to Morocco 30 years ago. And I am proud to say that I worked hard on that issue—human rights and respect for human rights—when I was Ambassador in Algeria, and I would do so in Syria if I am confirmed.

As the just-issued State Department report on the human rights situation in Syria noted, there are very big problems there. And there is much that an Ambassador could and should do to help Syrians determine how best to implement peaceful reforms and improve respect for human rights.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, this is a big agenda, and it is a hard one. It doesn't promise fast results. But all of these items are

in our national interest, and it is in our national interest that we press the Syrians on these issues daily at the highest levels.

Improving relations between us and Syria has to be a two-way street. It will require that Syria take steps to match steps we take. Sometimes we have seen the Syrians respond. For example, the Europeans, after long, hard discussions, convinced the Syrians to toughen their laws against trafficking in persons. And after we pressed, Syria also saw how it was in its interests to cut the flow of fighters going into Iraq.

However, the Syrian Government didn't go as far as we want in shutting down those networks. And it reminds us that we have to be firm and we have to be patient. Thus, as I said, it is a full agenda, but if confirmed, I am ready to start on it.

Thank you very much. And I would be pleased to take questions. [The prepared statement of Ambassador Ford follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT STEPHEN FORD

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 decisionmaking 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 4 years in Iraq, I saw firsthand 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 Hezbollah 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 relaunching 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 Hezbollah 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 Hezbollah 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 health care 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 U.N. 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 percent 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.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Ambassador. I appreciate the framing that you have just presented to us.

Let me ask you, since you have just been in Iraq, and the Iraq tripartite cooperation is a major issue with Syria. There is some evidence that Syria may have been blindsided by the collapse of the Iraq initiative, and it came about partly because of Prime Minister Maliki's needs, not so much ours or Syria's.

Could you share with us your sense of what the possibilities are in terms of border cooperation and how you might see the current post-election process empowering us to move forward in that regard?

Ambassador FORD. Senator, as I said, the Syrians themselves have a real interest in a stable and secure and sovereign Iraq. With respect to the tripart discussions that you talked about, there was an effort which the administration undertook to bring the Iraqis, the Syrians, and some of our experts together to look at how to improve security along the border. In the end, those discussions didn't

happen because of events that occurred in Baghdad and the Iraqi political reaction after that.

We still hope that Iraq and Syria will find a way to build a better bilateral relationship. There is a huge amount—

The CHAIRMAN. Could you be more explicit? What were the interests? What happened in that regard? What did Maliki see as—go ahead.

Ambassador FORD. In particular, Prime Minister Maliki publicly and in private accused the Syrians of being—of helping the groups that executed the August 19th bombings in Baghdad, the bombings that destroyed the Foreign Ministry and the Finance Ministry.

The CHAIRMAN. Did you have any evidence to that effect?

Ambassador FORD. Mr. Chairman, we have, of course, studied it. We have not found a direct link.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Dodd and I were there and met with President Assad a number of years ago, and I have met with him since. He has been very clear about his interest in having a stable Iraq. And everything that we understand documents what you have said. It is in their interest.

They have a Sunni majority population. And then, of course, in Iraq, it is a minority. Their interest is in seeing it stable and not having it spill over into their country and so forth. So we accept that at face value.

But what is it now that can be done, in your judgment, to rapidly get this back on track? You don't have to turn the microphone on and off. You can just leave it on.

Ambassador FORD. OK. Thank you.

Senator, the first and most important thing that the Iraqis could do—sorry, the Syrians. The first and most important thing the Syrians could do is to shut down the remaining foreign fighter networks. They have not shut them all down. The number of fighters going over the border, we estimate, was about 100 per month, say, 2½ years ago, mid-2007. That number has diminished now to about 10. So that is a big improvement.

Part of that improvement probably is less because of a Syrian policy decision than because our forces in Iraq and Iraqi security forces have had a lot of success taking down some of the al-Qaeda networks in places like Baghdad and Mosul. But the Syrians have shut down some networks. That is good. But they haven't shut them all down. There is more they could and should do.

And frankly, were they to do that, I think the Iraqis would notice and would respond. In addition—

The CHAIRMAN. When you say they could and should, that is to a certainty that we know those groups are under their control and/or within their capacity to shut down?

Ambassador FORD. We think they have the capacity, Senator.

In addition, Senator, in terms of the politics of the relations between Iraq and Syria, the Syrians promote and allow—well, both promote and allow groups, Iraqi groups to undertake activities that are destabilizing to the constitutional government in Iraq.

For example, there is a television station in Iraq—sorry, in Syria, named Al Rai. It is operated by a real rogue named Mishaan al-Jabouri, and it shows pictures of Humvees blowing up and attacks on American forces, attacks on Iraqi forces. This is not a television

station that is broadcasting to Syrian audiences, Mr. Chairman. It is broadcasting to Iraqis. It is trying to foment violence against our forces and against Iraqis, and there is no reason for the Syrians to promote that. They have it in their capacity to turn that off.

There are other things in that vein, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. I had a conversation the other day with President Assad when I was in the Middle East, and he mentioned the degree to which they have kept their word with respect to Lebanon and that Lebanon has been, in fact, relatively quiet over the period of the last months since the election and new government.

Can you speak to the Syrian posture vis-a-vis Lebanon now and what you see as the stakes for Lebanon in terms of better American relations with Syria?

Ambassador FORD. We are firmly committed, as I said, to Lebanese sovereignty and stability. And we have worked quite hard to build and strengthen the capacity of Lebanese institutions. We would like the Syrians also to cooperate with Lebanese Government institutions.

It is a good step that they opened an Embassy in Beirut. It is a good step that they announced during the visit of Prime Minister Hariri to Damascus that they would begin the border—the Syrian-Lebanese border delineation effort.

The Syrians, in a sense, Mr. Chairman, said that this would open a new era of relations. The Hariri visit would open a new era of relations between Syria and Lebanon. And that would be good. We welcome that, but we would like to see that actually implemented on the ground.

And of course, one of the biggest problems is the transshipment of weapons from Syria to armed groups, notably Hezbollah, but not limited to Hezbollah, which contravene United Nations Security Council resolutions and, frankly, undermine the Lebanese state.

The CHAIRMAN. Fair enough. There are obviously some questions to pursue with respect to Hezbollah, but my time is up.

Senator Lugar.

Senator LUGAR. Ambassador, United States officials have visited Damascus frequently, as we already mentioned, throughout 2009 and even into 2010. Furthermore Syrian officials have been invited to Washington. The Syrian Ambassador in Washington has been meeting regularly with United States policymakers. But now the question is about sending you to be the Ambassador in Syria.

Thus far, the American public has seen Syria's response to our positive attitudes as belligerent at worst, and dismissive at best. And I just inquire: has something occurred to further anger the Syrians while all this is going on, and what the signs are that a gesture of respect on our part would be similarly met?

You have mentioned that by being in Syria you can express directly our policies to the Syrians and the penalties for noncompliance and so forth, our calculations, depth, and reasoning in formulating the policy. But to some extent, a good bit of this has been proceeding without having an ambassador. Why would this additional step make a difference, or is there something occurring that you perceive in Syrian policy that is more promising?

Ambassador FORD. Senator, I think it is very much in our national interests, especially when tensions are rising in the region,

to have an Ambassador in Syria. It is an important country. It has its own interests in places like Iraq—we were just talking about Lebanon—and the Middle East. And it has an ability also to be helpful or to be unhelpful.

In those situations, I think sustained dialogue, sustained lobbying, if you will, are really useful to make sure that both sides understand exactly what the other's thinking is, that both sides understand what the other's calculations are. It is very hard in countries in the region for an Embassy to go in at sort of a medium level and get messages passed up to the top. The bad news just doesn't flow upward very well over there.

There is a lot more we could be doing, frankly, were we to have an Ambassador there, both to remind the Syrians of what our calculations are and also where their interests best lie. These are things in our interest, regardless of how the Syrians respond in the short term.

Senator LUGAR. Well, let us say that you are there, and you find, as you pointed out in your long statement, that Syria has a very large young population that perhaps have different views, and might, in due course, be more friendly toward the United States. We already have adopted a certain number of sanctions against Syria and not with regard necessarily to young people, but to older people, too, such as those in the business community and otherwise.

What sort of changes will we need to make, and what sort of advice could we anticipate in this committee that you might come back and offer in order to really make headway with this young population or with the business folks or so forth, you would need us to reconsider one thing or another to facilitate that activity?

Ambassador FORD. Yes. I just think it is very important to reach out beyond government circles when you are an ambassador. Frankly, any position in an embassy, the diplomatic staff, that would be part of my job managing the embassy is to make sure we are reaching out to all segments of the society.

A couple of things come to mind, Senator. In the wake of the Syrian allegations of an American raid on the Syrian border, they shut down our cultural center in Damascus. They have allowed the English language teaching center to reopen, which is a good step. We welcome that.

And I understand that, actually attendance at our English language courses is quite high. I think young Syrians want to learn English; many. And many young Syrians are interested in being exposed to different viewpoints.

There is an American cultural center, which has not yet reopened, and that is certainly something that would be on my agenda as soon as I arrive. But we also have what we call "American corners," Senator. These are smaller cultural centers placed in things like universities. When I was in Algeria, we opened three of them. We have two in Syria right now, and I would like to see those reinvigorated.

And then we will have our contacts with the business community, absolutely. The Embassy does now, but the possibilities for economic relations are limited because of the strong sanctions regime that we have in place now.

Senator LUGAR. Well, as I said, I extend an open invitation to you. As you see sanctions which may or may not be helpful, if you see openings for engagement, obviously, you have made some thoughtful suggestions about the youth, and the American corners idea, I think, is superb and one which I have introduced a resolution to encourage, especially in those places where security considerations have forced them to close or restricted access to them. But, please do keep in touch because it may be that some back and forth is going to be required to get your message out.

Finally, I think all of us in the Senate and administration were really staggered by news of the Syrian nuclear program, and this came, first of all, through intelligence sources that were closely guarded. Now it became a much more general picture. Given our preoccupation with all of this proceeding in Iran, suddenly to find out that almost side by side something had been occurring in Syria. That was truly significant. And that there may have been the same traces of A.Q. Khan, really was staggering.

Now I know you will continue to pursue this issue, as will the IAEA and others, but it is something that will not go away without there being much more international understanding of what the President and the Government of Syria have in mind with regard to this program. It has been reported that the President hid some information related to the program from many of his own officials, but the general dialogue within the country about this program was rather limited.

But I know you understand the seriousness of this, and perhaps it constitutes another argument, as you presented, for your presence and persistence and for a good staff there to join you.

Thank you very much.

Ambassador FORD. Thank you, Senator.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Dodd.

Senator DODD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

And welcome, Mr. Ambassador, to the committee. These hearings obviously perform a dual function, one to pass judgment on your qualifications to serve in the post for which you have been nominated and, second, to pursue policy questions regarding, in this case, bilateral relationships, as well as regional relationships.

And let me just say at the outset how fortunate we are to have someone of your background and experience. So the questions will be more focused on policy issues than whether or not you are qualified for this job. You are eminently qualified, and I want to congratulate you.

I noticed, however, in your resume here, you don't list having been in the Peace Corps. And as a former Peace Corps Volunteer, is there any particular reason why you are hiding that fact?

Ambassador FORD. No. I think that is a failure of my writing up a biography on short notice, Senator. Sorry.

Senator DODD. Well, add it on because it is an issue, and I am not going to dwell on this particular point. But we have only two Peace Corps programs in the Muslim world, in Morocco and Jordan. Now there is talk of Indonesia and opening a Peace Corps program there.

And for years, I have pursued the idea in Egypt, where you studied—

Ambassador FORD. Yes.

Senator DODD [continuing]. As another likely choice. Obviously, Syria is not necessarily on the brink, although I have a niece that is going to study there in a few weeks.

Ambassador FORD. Really?

Senator DODD. Yes. She is going to Jordan and then Syria and then spending several months in Turkey as well. She is a student at Middlebury.

Ambassador FORD. Oh.

Senator DODD. In the language programs there. So it is encouraging to me that we have young people in this country willing to study this language. You talk about Syrians studying English. It is tremendously important we have young Americans, as you did years ago, pursue the cultural and linguistic abilities in the Arab world as well.

Ambassador FORD. Absolutely agree.

Senator DODD. We need more and more of these students along the way.

Senator Lugar and Senator Kerry have pursued these broad range of issues. And Senator Kerry and I had a very interesting meeting, I guess, 3 years ago, in December of 2006 with President Assad, when we made a visit to the region. I will ask consent, Mr. Chairman, if I could just have my opening comments be put in the record as well along those lines.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection.

[The prepared statement of Senator Dodd follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. CHRISTOPHER J. DODD,
U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing. And, Mr. Ford, thank you for your service to this country, and for agreeing to take on the complex and critical responsibilities of this post.

We have lacked an ambassador in Syria for far too long. The previous administration did not believe that we should talk to countries with whom we have a difficult relationship. That policy was in no one's best interest, least of all America's.

The Obama administration, on the other hand, has chosen to put diplomacy at the forefront of foreign policy, and there could be no better example of their commitment to diplomacy than their selection of Robert Ford to be our Ambassador in Damascus.

While I am hopeful—as are many here, in Syria, and throughout the Middle East—at the prospect of a new chapter in the relationship between our two countries, I know that change doesn't happen overnight.

To my understanding, Syria has clamped down on fighters and weapons flowing across its borders into Iraq. That's a good start, but more needs to be done. I believe that if Syria acts as a responsible neighbor, it can have a positive relationship with its neighbor Iraq.

However, Syria continues to engage in deeply troubling behavior. Not only has it failed to establish diplomatic and political relations with Lebanon consistent with international norms, Syria also persists in supplying weapons and other support to Hezbollah and Hamas. This is categorically unacceptable. Meanwhile, Syrian-Israeli peace remains elusive, despite the fact that the outlines of an eventual deal appear relatively clear to both sides.

And, of course, the lack of human rights and the weak rule of law within Syria's borders, problems which include crackdowns on personal freedom and freedom of the press, represent an affront to the democratic values we seek to share with all nations.

These are serious issues. We cannot ignore our serious concerns with policies of the Syrian Government, but the strategy of simply issuing demands and ultimatums has not worked and is no longer operative. What better way to address our concerns and advance our interests than to have a capable and competent American Ambassador in Damascus, delivering our message to the highest levels of the Syrian Gov-

ernment? In my view, this serious and level-headed approach is the right way to go. And that new approach begins with Mr. Ford. I welcome him to the committee, thank him for his service, and look forward to his confirmation.

Senator DODD. I have lines of questions. One is, as I understand it, and I don't think things have changed much, that the Syrians, in terms of their reopening negotiations with the Israelis, would like to sort of begin the process where things had left off. Whereas, the Israelis, as I understand it, would like some preconditions, and understandably so, I might add.

Can you give us some sense of how you think you might square that circle? Because as some have suggested, I think Senator Lugar did as well and Senator Kerry, that avenue may offer more promise, at least initially here, than the relationships between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And I think that a breakthrough there could have a very positive impact in the region. So give us some sense of how you will square that circle, if that is a correct analysis, by the way, of the two sides' positions.

Ambassador FORD. Let me share some thoughts on that, Senator Dodd. And also I really applaud your daughter for going out—
Senator DODD. Niece.

Ambassador FORD. Your niece for going—

Senator DODD. I have a 5-year-old and an 8-year-old. They are not quite ready for—

[Laughter.]

Ambassador FORD. So with respect an Israel-Syria peace agreement, first, as Senator Kerry said, it really would change the region. It would be a game-changer. It is very much in American interests to have a comprehensive peace settlement in the region. My understanding is that the indirect discussions between Syria and Israel in 2008, conducted through Turkish intermediation, made considerable headway. However, they did not, obviously, result in an agreement.

The Syrians are insistent on the return of the Golan, full return of the Golan. On the Israeli side, my understanding is that the Israelis want to carefully understand the Syrian commitments to what a peace agreement means in terms of normal relations and Syria's role in the broader regional stability question. And that is a fair question.

So it is important, therefore, that we find a way, that we find a formula to get the Israelis and the Syrians back to these negotiations so that we can see how far the Syrian Government is willing to go in terms of commitments with respect to normalization and regional stability.

Senator DODD. Is that something now, that is more of a Mitchell portfolio than yours?

Ambassador FORD. Senator Mitchell and his team have the lead. But obviously, our Embassy in Damascus would help and coordinate carefully with them.

Senator DODD. I tried to find the answer to this question, and I should know it, and I apologize for not knowing it. Tell me, in Baghdad, who has embassies in Baghdad now within the region? Iran has an Embassy there.

Ambassador FORD. Oh, yes; they do.

Senator DODD. Yes. Well, then my point is, and I heard you talk about the Iraqi difficulty with the Syrians for the reasons you outlined, and yet, given the history of Iran and Iraq, given the production of weapons and the like, it seems to be somewhat of an inconsistency here, given Iranian involvement in undermining Iraqi stability. Lay that out for me a little bit as to how this plays out.

Ambassador FORD. Yes. Let me give you my read on that, Senator Dodd. And I am going to bring in the Syrian angle.

The Iranians in Iraq certainly have a very active Embassy, frankly. Their Ambassador is rather notorious there. In addition, they have provided assistance, weaponry, and other resources to Shia extremist militias. They continue to do that, and they exert genuine direct pressure on some of the Iraqi political parties. They actually get quite involved in it.

Their goal, as best I can tell, Senator, is to have a government which is largely dominated by one particular sect, at least at the senior levels. I do not think, frankly, that the Syrians share that objective. I don't think their interest, as they perceive it, is the same.

The Iraqis that are in Damascus, the ones receiving the support that I mentioned, are absolutely not Shia. They are Sunni and they are secular, for the most part. They are not Islamist. And in addition, the Syrian interest seems to be for a stronger government that will ensure the unity of the state. They are not enamored with the idea of a more decentralized federal Iraq.

And so, the two countries, Iran and Syria, on this issue of Iraq, I think, do not share an eye-to-eye agreement on what is best for Iraq. Now, of course, for the United States, we want Iraqis to make these decisions, and we are very encouraged by the elections. This was the fifth election that has been held in Iraq since the fall of the Saddam regime. I am counting a referendum on the constitution in that five.

The turnout was good, 62 percent, according to the data. The count is going slow, and I think those of us that are really curious about how it is going to go are looking at the news reports every day and waiting to see more figures. I think the Iraqis have come a long way from when I first went there in 2003. They have a long way to go. But in terms of developing a more democratic political culture, they have made real strides.

And what we would like to see now is for Syria to understand that government is not going anywhere. The constitutionally elected Government of Iraq is going to stay. It is not going to be overthrown.

And so, they have an interest in shutting down foreign fighters. They have an interest in not helping groups trying to undermine the state. Instead, Syria has a real interest in consolidating relations with Iraq, and these groups that they allow freedom to run around aggravate relations. And so, they don't have an interest in that.

Senator DODD. Well, thank you very much. And again, thank you for your service. And I commend the Obama administration for deciding to send an Ambassador and reopen the diplomatic front. So wish you the very best.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Dodd.
Senator Isakson.

Senator ISAKSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate the time you gave me yesterday on the phone, Mr. Ford. Thank you very much.

I really have two questions, one on what we were just talking about. Is there not still a large number of Iraqi refugees in Syria?

Ambassador FORD. Senator, the numbers vary. The Syrian Government has said that the number is up around a million. I have seen recent figures from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, which says that the number of registered Iraqi refugees in Syria is about 250,000. That estimate is probably too low. It would be more than 250,000, but it could be in the range 400,000, 500,000.

I have to say on this, Senator, if you permit me, in some ways the Syrian Government has been very helpful on the Iraqi refugee issue. They have kept their border open so that people fleeing because they are worried about getting murdered and killed at home have been able to take refuge in Syria. In particular, a number of Iraqi Christians, the Iraqi Christian community from northwestern Iraq, Ninawa province, have gone into Syria.

And they have provided things, some assistance to the refugees there at Syrian Government expense. And more recently, they said that Iraqi refugees would have permission to work, which is a new decision and will help the Iraqi refugees there.

May I make one last comment on this, Senator? Again, speaking personally, we have a real moral obligation to help the Iraqi refugees, we have been so involved in Iraq.

And the Congress and the American people have responded very generously, over \$300 million in the last year's budget to help Iraqi refugees.

And we have ongoing programs in Syria. In fact, Syria last year was the destination from which the largest number of refugees came to the United States, Iraqi refugees came to the United States out of Iraq through Syria. There is more we would like them to do. Senator Kerry mentioned about the—or, no, Senator Lugar, I think, mentioned about the circuit writers from the Homeland Security. We would like to see more visas issued. It would help our processing, and they could issue more authorizations for NGOs to work with those refugees.

So there is work to be done there, too, but I think we can make progress on that, Senator.

Senator ISAKSON. Given the relative stability that you referred to with the Iraqi Government now being in place, conducting elections, what is the reticence for refugees to stay in Syria and not come back to Iraq?

Ambassador FORD. We have done pretty detailed surveys of that, Senator, and the United Nations has as well. There are still security concerns among the refugee populations in places like Syria and Jordan. As the security situation in Iraq gradually improves, we think we will see more refugees going back home.

In the past year, calendar year 2009 saw total number from Syria, Jordan, and other countries going back into Iraq around 200,000, which is a lot higher than a couple of years ago. The sec-

ond issue is: will they find jobs when they get back to Iraq? And absolutely, the Iraqi economy needs to start generating more job growth. That will be a big issue for the new government.

Senator ISAKSON. On the question of Israeli-Syrian talks, is it correct that Syria was a conduit for rockets getting into Lebanon that were ultimately fired against the Israelis?

Ambassador FORD. That has been true in the past, Senator. Yes.

Senator ISAKSON. Have the Syrians in any way renounced the Hezbollah or renounced what they did in that conflict?

Ambassador FORD. No. And in fact, just a couple of weeks ago, they hosted the leader of Hezbollah to a dinner with Iranian President Ahmadinejad and the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a three-way dinner, which was widely publicized throughout the Middle East.

Senator ISAKSON. I took it that that was almost a surrogate conflict between Iran and Israel, not between Lebanon and Israel. Is that a fair statement? That may not be a fair question to ask you, but that was my impression.

Ambassador FORD. What I would say on that, Senator, is unquestionably Iran promotes Hezbollah, as does Syria, as a means of pressuring Israel. I think—but the Hezbollah fighters themselves are dedicated. They are serious terrorists, and they mean to do harm to Israel.

Senator ISAKSON. Well, you have a big job ahead of you in a very dangerous part of the world, and I wish you the best of luck because improvement is what we need, and we need it desperately.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Senator.

Senator Casey.

Senator CASEY. Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much, and we are grateful that you are willing to take on yet another tough assignment. So we appreciate that, especially at this time in our history, we want to commend your service.

Ambassador FORD. Thank you.

Senator CASEY. I wanted to talk about at least two areas. One is with regard to Syria's nuclear intentions or ambitions, how you assess those ambitions and, second, the related question about their failure to cooperate with inquiries from the IAEA. And then, I will move back to some of the questions that Senator Isakson raised about their support giving asylum to both Hezbollah and support for Hamas.

But first, on the nuclear question, how do you assess those intentions or ambitions and, second, on the IAEA?

Ambassador FORD. Senator Casey, thank you.

We have ourselves a lot of concerns about this, as I said, big concerns. Two things I would especially emphasize. No. 1, Syria is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is incumbent upon them on their signature on the treaty for them to cooperate fully with the IAEA when it wants to do inspections. And so, without speculating about what the Syrian intentions are, I would just say it is incumbent on the Syrians to cooperate.

In addition, I would also add the Syrians perhaps want a civil nuclear energy program. I don't know. But given that there is an ongoing IAEA investigation into the Syrian nuclear program, we do

not think it would be appropriate for any other country to cooperate now with the Syrians on a nuclear energy program while this investigation is ongoing. First, the investigation needs to be resolved.

Senator CASEY. Let me just follow up on part of that. Let me ask it this way. I wouldn't want you to speculate either.

Let me just ask you, fundamentally, is there anything in the public record that you could point to as evidence that their intention is other than peaceful or civilian nuclear in intention, as opposed to something that would be clear from the public record that it is an attempt to weaponize or to have military use of their nuclear program?

Ambassador FORD. There is certainly press speculation, Senator Casey. I am sure you have seen it, as I have, with respect to the facility at al-Kibar, the one which the Israelis destroyed.

I think it is, therefore, all the more in Syria's interest to cooperate with the IAEA on this inspection. If the program was as they said, then the investigation would bear those facts out. Not cooperating actually raises more questions, and therefore, the Syrians have an interest in terms of their own credibility with the international community in letting the inspectors do what they need to do.

Senator CASEY. With regard to Hezbollah and I guess also with regard to Hamas, but especially Hezbollah, obviously, the Syrians would be enhancing the likelihood that the Middle East, some of the conflicts in the Middle East could be moved forward or I should say resolution of conflicts in the Middle East could move forward if they were willing to change their attitude and their willingness to give asylum to Hezbollah and support.

I am asking you what is your intention with regard to the work that you have to do on those questions? I am hoping that you would raise that, and I think you should. I guess I want to get a sense of your strategy with regard to approaching the Syrians on the question of Hezbollah.

Ambassador FORD. A couple of things on that, Senator. First, the Syrians themselves would like to see a change in the sanctions that we apply to them. It is going to be impossible to do that while they support—some of the sanctions are a direct result of their support to terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. We can't change those sanctions and the restrictions that they bring about until the Syrians change their behavior. We have to be very clear with them about that.

Second, it is important now when we are trying to restart negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians that the Palestinians themselves unify behind the idea of negotiations and move forward. I think it would be very helpful if Syria would press and use its influence with hard-line Palestinian groups—terrorist groups like Hamas, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—to back these efforts and to let the negotiations, if we can get them started, get them to move forward again. The Syrians should be helpful on that.

With respect to Lebanon and Hezbollah, Senator, this is really a serious problem. It is a serious problem. And it is not a new Syrian policy, dates back 20, 25 years. It is something I intend to raise

regularly because were a conflict to break out again, and we had a really bad one in 2006, very serious, A, Syria could be dragged into it even if it doesn't intend to at the beginning, the risk of miscalculation.

And second, it does not help their credibility with the broader international community to be seen as one of the parties facilitating that kind of fighting, that kind of conflict. They have an interest themselves in being helpful on these things. And one of my jobs is going to be to explain to them where their interests can be better served.

Senator CASEY. Thanks very much.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Webb.

Senator WEBB. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And Ambassador, I would like to give a big congratulations to this administration for having matched someone with your background and your experience into this job. And I wish you all the best.

Ambassador FORD. Thank you.

Senator WEBB. I would like to follow on something that began with Senator Dodd. A number of people have picked up on this and your own responses as well with respect to the relationship between Syria and Iran, but also to get some of your thoughts on the situation with respect to China and Syria.

It has been said many times that Syria and Iran are not really natural allies in terms of history and culture and these sorts of things, and actually, some of your comments with respect to the situation in Iraq illuminate that. And it's also a concern for a lot of people, including myself, that China has taken advantage in many different places around the world of opportunities that have existed because of American policies with respect to sanctions or rigorous standards in places like Iran, Syria, Burma, Cambodia, and a number of other places.

So what I would really like to hear from you today is your thoughts with respect to those two relationships in Syria and to the extent that the relationships between Syria and those two countries have been empowered by our sanctions and also to the extent to which perhaps they have come about simply because of the recalcitrance of the Syrian Government to date. In other words, where can we go from here on both of those?

Ambassador FORD. Thank you, Senator Webb.

Let me say a couple more things about the relationship between Iran and Syria, which this is a relationship that is troubling, frankly. For 16 years, going back to Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, the Syrian Government has said that a peace agreement—a peace agreement with Israel, including normalized relations, could be in Syrians' interest. I have never heard President Ahmadinejad of Iran say that.

And so, it is not clear where exactly that relationship, the Syrian-Iran relationship with respect to this key question in the Middle East, how they would handle that stress. They perceive a different end state.

There may be opportunities there, Senator. I don't know. As I said, I don't promise fast results in any of this. This is a tough one. But I think there are certainly questions there to explore, and I

think Senator Mitchell has been exploring it with his team, and they think there are prospects to work on, that there are things that we can try, we can work on.

With respect to the relationship between Syria and China, I have to confess, Senator, I am just not at all well-versed on that. And with your permission, could I take that as a question for the record, and I will get back to you promptly?

Senator WEBB. I would be interested in your thoughts. Maybe even after you assume your position and have an opportunity to view it from that perspective. It is a wide-ranging concern that people who are examining our own national policies, I think, ought to take into account when we are attempting to improve bilateral relations in these places where the relationships have calcified over the years.

Again, I would like also to say here that I very much appreciate the precision of the answers that you have given to all of these questions today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Kaufman, I know you have just arrived. But we welcome your participation.

Senator KAUFMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

I just want to ask questions. I know Senator Webb just asked you about relations with Iran. I just kind of get your feel on Syria's relations with a number of different countries, if we can just kind of go down the list of the usual suspects. The first one would be Iraq.

Ambassador FORD. It is a—to put it short, it is a very problematic relationship, but one where, frankly, we should be able to persuade them to be much more helpful. They have a real interest, both economically and in terms of their own security, to have a better relationship with Iraq.

The Lebanon situation, as I have described, they have taken some good steps. But they need to take more steps. They need, in a sense, to implement this era of new relations, which President Bashar al-Assad talked about when Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri visited Damascus in December. And in particular, Syrian transshipments of weapons to groups, terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Palestinian radicals.

Relations with Jordan, I think, are relatively good. The two countries just removed exit taxes. When you depart the country, you don't have to pay an exit tax any longer. So they are trying to promote movement of people across the borders.

Last, Senator, I should mention because it is important in region's politics. People pay a lot of attention to this, the relationship between Syria and Saudi Arabia. For a long time, these relations were quite strained. In recent years, the relations have gotten much better. President Bashar al-Assad visited Riyadh recently, and they seemed to be talking more and trying to coordinate more.

I think in particular they are talking to the Saudis about how to approach the next Iraqi Government, and I think they also share some concerns in other places, such as Yemen and the Houthi rebellion there.

Senator KAUFMAN. How about Turkey?

Ambassador FORD. Yes, Turkey, that is a relationship which the Syrians have turned around dramatically. The relations between Syria and Turkey used to be quite difficult. The Syrians ended their support for the PKK, it was July. And in recent years and months, the relations have become quite warm. In fact, the Turkish Foreign Minister was just in Syria last week, and the Syrians would like to see Turkey play a role again as an intermediary with Israel. I am not sure if that would be acceptable to the Israeli Government right now.

Senator KAUFMAN. Yes. When I met with President Assad, he said that Turkey was their best friend, an even better friend than Iran. How would you analyze that?

Ambassador FORD. I think the Syrians and the Turks at least have a vision of how—if you take the Syrian statements that they support the idea of a peace agreement with Israel, that a peace agreement could be in their interest, then you can see how a Turkish vision and a Syrian vision line up in a way that, frankly, I do not see with the Iranians.

So, and in addition, Turkish interests in Iraq maintaining unity of the state where all of the ethnic and sectarian components of the society feel safe and feel they have a role there, I think also fits in with Syrian interests probably more so than Iran's, frankly.

Senator KAUFMAN. And you know, the dust-up between President Assad and Prime Minister Maliki over the explosion in Baghdad, that seemed to me larger than I would have expected. Is that your feeling, or how do you analyze that?

Ambassador FORD. We feel very deeply the pain that the Iraqis have suffered through all of this terrorism and the countless lives of Iraqis that have been lost. The violence in Iraq is a lot—is much diminished from what it used to be, dramatically diminished, as you saw when you came out to Baghdad. But it is still a constant problem, and it is a constant threat.

The reaction of Prime Minister Maliki, therefore, the anger and the anxiousness to put an end to those kinds of car bomb attacks is entirely understandable, entirely understandable. However, we need to work together—we, the United States, and the Iraqis, who have the lead now on this—to take down the remaining networks.

We have come a long way. We have still some way to go, and we are working it very hard, Senator. And the Syrians, by shutting down the remaining foreign fighter networks, could help.

Senator KAUFMAN. This is a question I ask every Ambassador. So what do you do about freedom of the press and freedom of the Internet in Syria? I mean, as Ambassador, what are the things that you can kind of do to further that?

Ambassador FORD. Thank you for that. I feel very strongly about freedom of the press. It was a big issue for me when I was Ambassador in Algeria. I don't see how these societies evolve peacefully without freedom of the press. It is just essential.

A couple of things. We have included in the items which have a waiver from sanctions so that we can export them to Syria goods that are related to information technology and the Internet. We think, actually, the Internet can play a very positive role not just in Syria, but in countries around the world. And Secretary Clinton

has spoken very forcefully about this, and we will implement that part of the policy, absolutely, in Syria.

With respect to other freedom of the press issues, Senator, I would hope that we would have occasions to bring Syrian journalists to the United States on things like international visitor programs. We have done so in the past.

In a country where they have no tradition of freedom of the press and where the government does not respect it, I do not think we will get change overnight from one day to the next. This will be a thing where we will just push it and look for openings here and there and find ways to promote it, whether working with individual journalists or talking about human rights and press freedom policies with senior officials.

Senator KAUFMAN. Good luck. I mean, I think there are some real opportunities there. I really do. And I think that having—reinstating the Ambassador was, in my opinion, a very, very good decision, and they couldn't have picked a better person to go there. So best of luck.

Ambassador FORD. Thank you.

Senator KAUFMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Senator Kaufman.

I heard you talking about the foreign fighters issue and Syria. Did you talk about Hezbollah also?

Would you mind discussing the flow of arms and weapons and now bigger missiles into Lebanon and the arming of Hezbollah? And I wonder if you would speak to whether you think Syria could, in fact, take steps that would curtail that, or whether that is under the table and out of their control?

Ambassador FORD. Senator, we feel very strongly—I want to underline this point. We feel very strongly that Syria could take steps, and it should take steps. Hezbollah has rearmed since 2006, and it does present a real threat to Israel, and it presents a real threat to regional stability. And I do not see how instability in the region serves Syrian interests.

With respect to the nature of the weaponry, absolutely it is destabilizing if Hezbollah has rockets that can hit farther into Israel. It complicates everyone's calculations and raises the risk of miscalculations and the risk of conflict. It is destabilizing.

The CHAIRMAN. Is there any issue that you could contemplate coming across in the context of being Ambassador to Syria that you would have to recuse yourself from? Have you so notified anybody in the State Department?

Ambassador FORD. I can't think of anything, Senator; no.

The CHAIRMAN. And is there any potential conflict of interest in any holding or otherwise that you have?

Ambassador FORD. No. No, no, no.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, Mr. Ambassador, we are grateful to you for submitting yourself to yet another posting. This is an important one, as they all have been. But I think this presents, as I said earlier, some particular opportunities, and we wish you well.

I am confident that the committee will be able to move your nomination rapidly, and we certainly look forward to trying to do that before we break for the Easter recess. So thanks very much for being here.

Are there any further questions, Senator Lugar? Additional questions?

If not, we wish you well, and we stand adjourned.

Thank you.

Ambassador FORD. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 10:45 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF HON. ROBERT STEPHEN FORD TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY
SENATOR JOHN F. KERRY

Question. Can you describe, in practical terms, how the presence of a full-time ambassador in Damascus will expand our ability to engage with the Syrian Government?

Answer. Since the withdrawal of Ambassador Margaret Scobey in 2005, the Syrian Government has denied lower-level U.S. Embassy officers access to ministerial-level or higher Syrian officials. Consequently, we have only been able to speak directly to Foreign Minister Muallim or President Asad on those occasions when senior American delegations have visited Damascus, or on the margins of multilateral summits. Additionally, the Syrian Government has restricted Embassy contact with working-level government officials, academics, civil society/NGOs, and has officially discouraged private Syrians from participating in Embassy outreach programs. Finally, the Syrian Government has restricted the ability of working-level U.S. officials to obtain visas to travel to Syria for temporary duty, although this situation has improved over the last year.

If confirmed, I would expect to have access and regular communication with the highest levels of the Syrian Government. I would also expect that our Embassy operations would be fully restored so that we can function as any other U.S. Embassy around the world—with robust outreach programs, more routine working-level contacts in the Syrian Government, and routine support from temporary staff, as necessary.

Question. On March 16, 2009, Lebanon opened up an Embassy in Damascus. Both countries have taken important steps toward normalizing relations. Demarcating borders, however, remains a contentious and challenging issue with broader security implications. What specific steps has Lebanon taken to demarcate borders? What steps has Syria taken? What remains to be done? How, if at all, has the administration encouraged progress on this issue?

Answer. We are pleased to see both Lebanon and Syria working to normalize their bilateral relations. While the exchange of ambassadors last year was an important first step, much work remains to be done, especially in terms of border security as outlined in Security Council Resolution 1701. Cross-border smuggling—a complex security, political and socioeconomic issue—remains a priority area of concern in our bilateral discussions with both Lebanon and Syria, particularly as it pertains to the transshipment of weapons to Hezbollah and Palestinian extremist groups in Lebanon. The demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese border, as called for in Security Council Resolutions 1680 and 1559, is a crucial step in this process.

Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri has pledged to make border security a priority for his government and recently appointed Minister of State Ogassapian to develop a border control strategy, which will be released in the coming weeks. We plan to continue working closely with the Lebanese Government and with the U.N. Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams in addressing how to best target the United States robust assistance program to provide the Lebanese with the resources needed to meet border security priorities. Additionally, the Lebanese Government has affirmed its commitment to extending the Common Border Force (CBF), composed of the Lebanese Armed Forces, Internal Security Forces, Customs Service and Surete General, to the eastern border. The CBF and the donor community are actively engaged in identifying the operational strategy and resource requirements necessary to expand eastward. Lebanon also has appointed the Secretary General of Lebanon's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the lead interlocutor on border delineation with Syria.

During Prime Minister Hariri's December 2009 visit to Damascus, President Asad announced Syria's support for a bilateral Syrian-Lebanese border committee to begin its work. Lebanon has already appointed its members to the committee and

is ready to commence discussions. Unfortunately, Syria thus far has failed to reciprocate.

We will continue to stress the need for progress on this issue in our high-level bilateral meetings and in multilateral fora, such as the United Nations, and maintain our close working relationship with both UNSCOL Williams and the U.N. Special Envoy for Implementation of Resolution 1559, Terje Roed Larsen. We also will continue to press Prime Minister Hariri and President Sleiman to make border security a priority and encourage them to raise this in their dialogue with Syrian counterparts.

Question. Syria continues to chafe under U.S. sanctions. You spoke at the hearing about the constraints on easing sanctions.

- To what extent could these sanctions be calibrated, either strengthened or reduced, as circumstances warrant in response to Syrian behavior, without congressional notification or additional congressional authorities? To what extent would congressional notification or additional congressional authorities be required?

Answer. The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SAA) provides the Executive with the authority to waive sanctions as may be required for national security, which would require congressional notification. The administration could also issue additional executive orders strengthening sanctions or withdrawing waivers in case Syria fails to meet its commitments, which would not require congressional notification. It would be premature to make predictions regarding any modification of sanctions, but as noted in my testimony, we are looking for concrete Syrian steps that address our issues of concern.

Question. Is the administration considering the review or modification of Executive Order 13338, and other existing executive orders pertaining to Syria, or the issuance of new executive orders?

Answer. The administration is continuously reviewing existing executive orders to ensure they remain appropriate and accurately reflect the political situation on the ground. So far, Syria has not made sufficient progress on any area of U.S. concern to merit a modification of E.O. 13338. We want to see changes in Syrian behavior before we consider modifying E.O. 13338. There are, to my knowledge, no new executive orders currently under consideration.

Question. The Syrians have made known to me their concerns about the safety of their aging civil aviation fleet. Would any potential steps that might be taken to address these concerns require either congressional notification or additional congressional authorities?

Answer. Currently, there is one existing waiver to the sanctions that addresses the safety of civil aviation in Syria—the waiver for spare parts and components relating to safety-of-flight. At some point, the age of Syria’s civil aviation fleet may create safety concerns that cannot be addressed by spare parts alone. There may also be a policy imperative for the U.S. to license the sale or lease of newer aircraft to Syria. In either case, the administration would need to exercise its authority codified in the SAA to create an additional waiver to license the sale or lease of an entire aircraft, which would require congressional notification.

Question. The situation of Iraqi refugees in Syria is likely to be protracted for many years. What are the key priorities for the United States with respect to Iraqi refugees in Syria? How will the United States work with Syria to address these priorities?

Answer. President Obama said in his speech on February 27, 2009, at Camp LeJeune that, “America has a strategic interest—and a moral responsibility” to act on behalf of Iraqi refugees. The safety and well-being of the refugees is of paramount concern to us, and we commend the Syrian Government and people for their generosity in allowing Iraqi refugees access to education and health care. At the same time, Iraqis in Syria face diminishing financial resources, uncertain legal status, and cannot legally work. Many do not plan to return to Iraq in the near future. We are resolute that no Iraqi refugees should face forced repatriation. If confirmed, I plan to work with the Syrian Government to improve living conditions for Iraqis, which would include identifying ways that Iraqis could provide for their own most basic needs. I will also encourage the Syrian Government to grant more NGOs permission to operate inside Syria to provide assistance to this vulnerable population. Finally, I will seek continued Syrian cooperation in issuing visas on a regular basis to our DHS Immigration Officers so they may interview those Iraqis who are eligible for resettlement consideration in the United States.

Question. While preparing the ground for return of refugees and assisting both returning refugees and internally displaced rests on the shoulders of the Iraqi Government, how will you use your position in Damascus to help the United States influence and pressure the Government of Iraq with respect to this population?

Answer. Beginning in the summer of 2010, Embassy Damascus will have a new refugee coordinator position whose work will be directed by PRM. She will be in regular contact with her counterparts in the refugee coordinator office at Embassy Baghdad, and will work with UNHCR and refugee-focused NGOs in Syria. The Damascus-based coordinator can highlight immediate needs where, for example, the Iraqi Government could provide funding, such as for heating oil in the next winter. The Damascus-based coordinator could also try to shape the Syrian Government's approaches to the international community and the Iraqi Government about the needs of the Iraqi refugee population in Syria. At the same time, while U.S. policy on Iraq is formulated in Washington in close coordination with our mission in Baghdad, I and other Chiefs of Mission in countries hosting refugees will contribute to that process with our reports and recommendations from the field.

Question. Widespread reports tell of Iraqi women being forced to prostitute themselves in Syria due to their lack of employment and ability to support themselves and their families. What can the United States do to assist these vulnerable women?

Answer. These reports deeply concern us. The administration provides significant funding to international organizations and NGOs supporting Iraqi refugees, including those residing in Syria. In FY09, the administration contributed \$387 million in assistance to Iraqi refugees, internally displaced, and conflict victims. In Syria, our contributions are used to provide basic assistance to Iraqi refugees, including education support, health care, food, and cash assistance for the most vulnerable—specifically women and children. If confirmed, I will press the Syrian Government to allow Iraqi refugees to engage in legal activities to provide for their most basic needs, and to rigorously enforce its new law criminalizing trafficking in persons. Standing up more targeted assistance programs with UNHCR and NGOs may also be possible, but we will need Syrian Government permission to expand the number of NGOs working with the refugee population.

Question. Recently, the Department of Homeland Security expressed concern that it may not meet its resettlement target for Iraqi refugees in Syria because of long delays in processing of Syrian visas for U.S. and NGO representatives. How will the United States address this problem with Syrian authorities?

Answer. PRM's Assistant Secretary Eric Schwartz raised this problem with Syrian Vice Foreign Minister Faysal Miqdad, who oversees the Iraqi refugee portfolio, during his visit to Iraq and Syria in November. Under Secretary William Burns addressed it again with Miqdad in February 2010. If confirmed, I will make the issuance of Syrian visas for DHS immigration officers a major priority. I will also work with DHS to ensure their personnel assignment policies have sufficient flexibility to accommodate the work needed to meet our resettlement goals for Syria.

Question. What is the United States policy toward the Hariri Tribunal?

Answer. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon is a crucial element in the effort to end impunity for political assassinations in Lebanon and the United States support for the Tribunal remains unwavering. We have made clear that no "grand bargain" over the Tribunal will be made with Syria. The Tribunal is not a political bargaining chip, and no deals will be made at the expense of justice. As U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has affirmed, the Tribunal process is irreversible. As evidence of our continued commitment to promoting justice in Lebanon, the United States has contributed \$20 million for the first 2 years of the Tribunal's operations and expects to remain a significant contributor going forward. Prosecutor Bellemare and his staff are conducting professional, methodical work and we have every expectation they will accomplish their goals.

Question. What role will the promotion of democracy, civil society, and human rights play in your role as Ambassador to Syria? Will you commit to raising high-profile human-rights cases directly with the Syrian leadership?

Answer. Human rights issues remain a priority for the Department of State and will be a focus of my work in Syria, if confirmed. The path to democracy in Syria must begin with a change in political culture that includes tolerance for dissent and a respect for basic political rights. The development of the nascent civil society that exists there is a necessary precondition to such an advance.

If confirmed, I would take three simultaneous approaches on human rights issues. First, in private, I would raise individual cases with the Syrian authorities, espe-

cially those that have generated international attention with NGOs like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Committee to Protect Journalists. The Syrians need to understand that as they try to promote a “new Syria” their human rights record detracts from their credibility. Second, I would coordinate with and seek to persuade other governments and the United Nations to raise human rights cases with the Syrians, so that the authorities in Damascus understand that this is not merely an American/NGO-inspired campaign against Syria. Finally, where it does not endanger Syrian activists, I would like to meet them myself to demonstrate our high-level support or have an embassy officer meet them. This will be easier to do with activists who work, for example, with women’s rights. Occasionally, we may use public events to highlight our concerns. For example, a Syrian woman finally obtained Syrian Government approval to attend a ceremony in Washington earlier this month as one of the winners of the State Department’s International Women of Courage Award, an event attended by both the Secretary of State and First Lady Michelle Obama.

Question. Russia has reportedly considered selling military equipment to Syria, including the MI-24D helicopter, and modernized its naval bases there. Could you discuss the extent of Russian military cooperation with Syria, America’s posture toward these developments, and their impact on the American-Syrian bilateral relationship?

Answer. Russia has a long history of military relations with Syria dating from the cold war that continues with arms sales and a Russian naval presence in the port of Tartous. In recent years, Russia cancelled a significant Syrian debt owed for arms sales, which was a burden on the Syrian economy. The U.S. maintains a watchful eye on any Russian military sales to Syria, and would strongly oppose the sale of any weapons that would significantly increase Syria’s offensive military capabilities.

Question. Israeli soldier Guy Hever has been missing since August 17, 1997. He was last seen near the Israeli-Syrian border heading east. In 2007 an organization called “Resistance Committees for the Liberation of the Golan Heights” claimed to be holding Hever in Syria. Will you raise the case of Guy Hever with Syrian authorities?

Answer. One of the results of not having had a U.S. Ambassador in Syria in several years is that many humanitarian cases, such as the parental abduction of American citizen children or missing American students, as well as the case of Guy Hever, have not been presented consistently to the highest levels of the Syrian Government. If confirmed, I will seek an appropriate opportunity to encourage the Syrian authorities to share any information they may have on Guy Hever.

RESPONSES OF HON. ROBERT STEPHEN FORD TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY
SENATOR RICHARD G. LUGAR

Question. We have some very close friends in the region that are looking at this move carefully. They look at Syria’s sponsorship of Hezbollah and Hamas as inexcusable and as direct threats to their own security. And you know better than anyone the reasons the Maliki government bears a heavy grudge toward Syria.

- Do you see any signs that the Syrian Government is seeking to change the conditions that so deeply affect these relationships?

Answer. Syrian President Asad at the conclusion of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri’s visit in December 2009 to Damascus stated that the Hariri visit marked the opening of a new era in Syrian-Lebanese relations. Syria has taken several steps to normalize its relationship with Lebanon. It opened an embassy in Beirut for the first time and sent an ambassador. Syria also announced its intention to begin technical meetings to delineate the border between Lebanon and Syria, and we are now awaiting progress on implementation of this pledge. However, Syria has not halted transshipments of weapons to terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Palestinian extremists based in Lebanon. As Ambassador, I would caution the Syrians that they are playing a risky game that undercuts their credibility both with the Lebanese Government and with potential Israeli negotiating partners.

On Iraq, the Syrians have received various Iraqi politicians from different factions that hope to field the next Iraqi Prime Minister. Ayad Allawi has visited Syria several times and said better relations with Syria are possible. Ammar al-Hakim (of the Shia Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) visited Damascus in December and said he had had good meetings, as did Vice President and Presidential hopeful Tariq al-Hashimi (Sunni Arab) who visited in early March. Moreover, Ezzet Shabbandar (a Shia secularist who ran with Maliki’s own election coalition) visited Damascus ear-

lier last week. The Syrians probably hope that Nouri al-Maliki will not return as Prime Minister, given past animosities. The Syrian authorities, however, are positioning themselves to be able to work with both Shia and Sunni political leaders as the Iraqis start standing up their next government. The speed at which bilateral relations improve depends above all on what the Syrian Government does with respect to Iraqi Baathist and Islamist rejectionists based in Damascus as well as what Damascus does with respect to the remaining foreign fighter networks still operating in Syria. If confirmed, very early in my tenure I would raise Syria's approach to Iraq, highlighting the potential economic gains and the minimal cost to Syria of shutting down the remaining fighter networks and ending Syrian support to Iraqi rejectionists.

Question. What effects have U.S. sanctions and administration executive orders had on Syria in recent years? What changes in policy have sanctions produced?

Answer. U.S. sanctions have been tangible reminders of our deep concern about Syrian policies, and have served to limit Syria's access to sensitive technologies. In the case of Treasury Department's designation of the Commercial Bank of Syria, they have also limited Syria's ability to conduct financial transactions that might benefit designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. While it may be difficult to demonstrate a direct cause and effect relation between sanctions and subsequent changes in policy, Syria regularly presses us for changes in or removal of the sanctions regime, and has recently expressed an interest in taking steps to improve its bilateral relationship with the United States.

The Treasury Department ruling against the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) has made it difficult for other Syrian banks to establish correspondent relationships with U.S. and many European banks.

Question. According to the long-range building plan, OBO has Damascus slated for new embassy construction in 2012. Can you update the committee on status of funding, land acquisition, construction contracts, and other plans, particularly challenges that might affect this plan? Where is the new property?

Answer. We have received a verbal commitment from the Syrian Government to help us locate and purchase a suitable piece of property on which to build a new embassy compound in suburban Damascus. With that commitment, a team of Department construction experts from the State Department's Overseas Buildings Office visited possible locations and conducted some initial planning. Unfortunately, we cannot commit resources or begin contracting until we have a written agreement with the Syrians. If confirmed, one of my priorities will be to secure this written agreement.

Question. How many students from Syria traveled on visas to the United States in the last 3 years for which we have complete statistics? How do those numbers compare to student visas issued for Iraqis and Iranian students? What is the Department doing to improve these numbers, especially with regards to Iraqi students, whom PM Maliki has pledged to send by the thousands?

Answer. The number of visas issued to prospective Syrian students remains lower than those of Iraqis, and is only a fraction of the number issued to Iranian students. The trend in issuances to Syrians over the past 3 years, however, is significantly upward, with a 41-percent increase from 2007 to 2009.

F-1 Student Visa Issuances

Country	2007	2008	2009
Syria	137 (91)	159 (116)	193 (127)
Iraq	162	203 (9)	225 (115)
Iranian	860	1,242	1,677

Note: The figures above do not include exchange visitor visas (J-1) or vocational/technical studies (M-1). They also do not reflect the number of students who actually used those visas to travel to the U.S., or how many changed status in the U.S. to become students from some other visa category. Numbers in parentheses are figures for issuance in country, as opposed to nationals who applied for their visa in a third country.

The Embassy in Baghdad first began issuing student visas in 2008, among the first category of nonimmigrant visas we processed in Iraq as a gesture to Iraq's future generations. In 2009, the Embassy augmented the number of American, Iraqi and third-country national employee staff as well as computer systems to process nonimmigrant visas in general. So far in 2010, the Embassy has issued 27 student visas. The Embassy encourages Iraqi students to apply in Baghdad, where there is

a culturally sensitive staff and Arabic linguists who understand the unique challenges facing Iraqi students.

In July 2009, the Iraqi Government launched the Iraqi Education Initiative (IEI), a scholarship fund designed to send thousands of Iraqi students to American universities over the next 5 years. There is currently a consortium of 229 U.S. universities interested in receiving IEI students. Participants in this program apply for J-1 exchange visitor visas rather than traditional F-1 student visas. Thus far in 2010, the Embassy has received 35 applications from students enrolled in this program who plan to attend American universities in the spring and summer semesters. In a March 23 meeting with the IEI, its Executive Director stated that the IEI will make 600 scholarships available for 2010 and 1,000 scholarships available for 2011. He hopes that IEI will fund more scholarships in the future, with the ultimate goal of 10,000 scholarships per year. Students who currently do not possess the necessary command of English will go to the U.S. or the U.K. for 1 year of language study before starting their academic programs. These scholarships are for undergraduate, masters and Ph.D. programs and are valid for the entire duration of the program. The estimated cost is \$50,000 per student per year.

The USG supports the Iraq Fulbright Scholars Program aimed at building sustainable relationships between U.S. and Iraqi scholars. Recently, the program budget was doubled from \$2.5 million to \$5 million with support by Prime Minister Maliki, which will support 70 more students. This is the largest Fulbright Program in the Middle East, and includes visiting student, language teaching assistant, science, and engineering doctoral programs. In addition, Embassy Baghdad is working with State's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau to start a related "Fulbright Scholars Program" with an initial budget of \$500,000. It will be launched in the summer of 2010 and will be for 25 Iraqi scholars, to be placed in one of five U.S. universities.

Processing of Iraqi student visas can be lengthy because of security clearances required for each Iraqi student. However, Iraqi student applicants and the Iraqi officials working on the scholarship program are coordinating with our Embassy to provide enough advance time for us to do the necessary security clearances in the U.S. interagency system. Ambassador Hill and other Embassy officers have visited Iraqi universities to encourage Iraqi students to consider studying in the United States.

Question. Regarding Iraq politics, very few saw Nouri al-Maliki emerging as the Prime Minister after the last election. This time, some observers are noting a deeply felt "anyone but Maliki" sentiment among the blocs. A Maliki-led bloc might similarly oppose any of the other top-tier names like Allawi or Hakim.

- Can you offer us insights to any lesser known talented politicians you have become familiar with that might emerge? Are the political dynamics you are seeing at play in Iraq inspiring or worrisome?

Answer. As the President, the Secretary and Ambassador Hill all have noted, the process of assembling a new Iraqi Government that wins the necessary parliamentary majority approval could take some months. What is encouraging is that even before the elections, political bloc leaders and politicians were crossing ethnic and sectarian lines to explore how they could form a broad-based government. They did not do this in 2005 or 2006, but Iraqi political culture has developed in terms of a diminished sectarian sensitivity among top political figures, compared to the 2005 and 2006 experiences where only U.S. pressure brought Sunni Arabs into the government. Also encouraging is that the last two elections (January 2009 provincial legislature elections and the March 2010 national parliamentary elections) used an "open-list" system that allows voters to cast ballots directly for individual candidates instead of lists. This will bring forward new political figures whose roots are closer to the populace and it will also compel parliamentarians to stay more closely connected to constituent concerns.

There are many up and coming Iraqi politicians whose names we didn't know even as recently as 2 years ago; they are emerging now in provincial legislatures, for example, and some will emerge as a result of the March 2010 election. Some will have tribal connections, and others will come from business, education, and legal backgrounds. We ought to maintain a robust international visitor and exchange program, including with USAID and State Department-funded technical assistance programs for the new Parliament, in order to help build the capacity of the new legislatures and also to expose them to Western points of view. Developing positive relationships with future leaders is in our mutual interest.

Question. You mentioned in your statement, the plight of Iraq's Christians. Is there more the United States can or should do on this issue?

Answer. Ambassador Hill meets regularly with Iraqi Christian leaders who are concerned about both the security situation and the decline in their communities as a result of the Christian exodus. Ambassador Hill and General Odierno have urged Prime Minister Maliki and his security team, as well as the Governor of Ninewah province where most of the security attacks against Christians have occurred, to boost security measures to protect Christians. According to Iraqi Christian leaders, this often spurs a good short-term Iraqi security response which tapers off over time. In addition, we have raised the security problems facing Iraqi Christians with Kurdish Regional Government authorities since some of the affected Christian communities live right along the Arab-Kurd fault line in northern Iraq. The Kurdish authorities have promised to do all that they can, and most of the security problems are outside areas the Peshmerga control.

The U.S. has also provided targeted economic and humanitarian assistance to these communities and is likely to continue doing so.

Question. According to the 2009 State Department Human Rights Report on Syria, despite guarantees in the Syrian Constitution to protect the right to free speech, the freedom of the press, and the right of assembly, the Syrian Government continues to violate these rights using provisions of the Emergency Law that was enacted after the government declared a state of emergency in 1963.

- As Ambassador, what would you do to encourage the Syrian Government to respect the fundamental rights of the Syrian people that are protected by the country's constitution?

Answer. If confirmed, I would take three simultaneous approaches on human rights issues. First, in private, I would raise individual cases with the Syrian authorities, especially those that have generated international attention with NGOs like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Committee to Protect Journalists. The Syrians need to understand that as they try to promote a "new Syria" their human rights record detracts from their credibility. Second, I would coordinate with and seek to persuade other governments and the United Nations to raise human rights cases with the Syrians, so that the authorities in Damascus understand that this is not merely an American/NGO-inspired campaign against Syria. Finally, where it does not endanger Syrian activists, I would like to meet them myself to demonstrate our high-level support or have an embassy officer meet them. This will be easier to do with activists who work, for example, with women's rights. Occasionally, we may use public events to highlight our concerns. For example, a Syrian woman finally obtained Syrian Government approval to attend a ceremony in Washington earlier this month as one of the winners of the State Department's International Women of Courage Award, an event attended by both the Secretary of State and First Lady Michelle Obama.

Question. The 2009 State Department Human Rights Report on Syria notes that "security forces continued to use torture" during the reporting period despite provisions in Syrian law preventing the state from using both mental and physical torture. According to the report, political activists were among those tortured by the Syrian Government.

- In your capacity as Ambassador, how would you engage the Syrian Government on this issue?

Answer. Torture and extrajudicial killings are major problems we highlighted in the 2009 Country Report on Human Rights Practices. I would raise these issues in private with the Syrian authorities, reminding them of their obligations under both Syrian law and under the U.N. Charter on Universal Human Rights. In my experience, the more detailed information we have on an individual's case, the more likely the authorities are to take action. I would also emphasize to the Syrian authorities that we will continue to make our concerns public and that they should expect that other governments and NGOs will do so as well. Last, if we see no improvement, we will consider encouraging a stronger U.N. investigatory role, as was done in Algeria in the 1990s, much to the chagrin of the Algerian authorities.

Question. According to the 2009 State Department Human Rights Report on Syria, "Lebanese Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar stated in a televised interview that 745 Lebanese citizens remained missing in Syria, divided into two categories: convicted criminals and victims of enforced disappearances." As Ambassador to Syria, would you encourage discussions between the Lebanese and Syrian Governments regarding the possible release of Lebanese citizens who have been convicted of crimes under the 1963 Emergency Law or otherwise arbitrarily detained by the Syrian Government? Additionally, would you encourage the Syrian Government to release other foreign nationals who have been detained under these circumstances?

Answer. Human rights issues remain a priority for the Department of State and will be a focus of my work in Syria, if confirmed. The issue of Lebanese detainees in Syria remains a concern for us and for the Lebanese Government, as outlined during Lebanese President Sleiman's visit to Damascus in August, 2009. If confirmed, I would encourage Syria to take meaningful steps to support its pledge of a new era in bilateral relations with Lebanon and seek much-needed progress on this issue, including through high-level bilateral discussions. Arbitrary detentions represent a gross violation of human rights and we remain supportive of Lebanon's efforts to address this issue in its discussions with Syria.

Question. Why has the Department decided to lift the objection to Syria's application to the WTO? Where does that fit into the engagement strategy?

Answer. The United States will not oppose Syria's application to begin accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). If the Syrians choose to apply for accession, it would be the first step in a long and highly demanding process of meeting WTO standards. If Syria is willing to comply with the measures required to achieve full WTO membership, it will need to implement significant reforms—including dropping its adherence to certain aspects of the Arab League Central Boycott of Israel—which we support. It will also need to improve labor rights, one of the areas that the 2009 human rights report identified as problematic. Syria has a thriving and resourceful entrepreneurial class that is hungry for reforms of the type required by the WTO. We believe this decision will empower Syrians who want to reform their economy.

RESPONSES OF HON. ROBERT STEPHEN FORD TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY
SENATOR RUSSELL D. FEINGOLD

Question. While I support increasing the reach of our diplomats, I continue to have concerns about the behavior of the Syrian regime, including its support for Hamas and Hezbollah, lack of cooperation and openness with regard to its nuclear activities, and worsening human rights record. If confirmed, what do you hope to achieve in regard to these issues, and what tools do you see at your disposal for keeping a strong and vocal focus on these and other U.S. concerns as part of our increased diplomatic profile in Damascus?

Answer. I share your concerns over these issues, and if confirmed, I would press the Syrian Government to play a more constructive role in the region. The U.S. has penalized Syria with sanctions resulting from four Executive orders, a Treasury Department ruling, the Syria Accountability Act, and its designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism for its support of Hamas and other terrorist groups. The Syrians would like to see a reduction or elimination of the sanctions that we apply to them. It will be impossible to do so while they support terrorists groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. If confirmed, I will be very clear with them about that. As a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, it is incumbent upon Syria to cooperate fully with the IAEA when it wants to do inspections. In the area of both Syrian support for terrorist groups and its failure to cooperate with the IAEA, I would also work to mobilize influential ambassador colleagues in Damascus from the United Nations mission, the European Union, Turkey, Russia, and Saudi Arabia to get their governments to press the Syrians too.

Hamas

With regard to Hamas, if confirmed I would remind the Syrian Government that Syrian support for Palestinian extremists complicates Syria's pursuit of regaining the Golan. The Syrian Government continues to provide support and sanctuary to Khaled Mishaal and other Hamas members. Syria's relationship with Hamas and other Palestinian rejectionist groups is one of the most troubling—and most difficult—issues we confront in engaging Syria. If confirmed, in coordination with Senator Mitchell's team, I would work to secure Syrian agreement to weigh in with Palestinian extremist groups based in Damascus to support, or at least not oppose, a resumption of Israel-Palestinian negotiations if we can get them restarted.

Hezbollah

Our policy of intensified dialogue with Syria will not come at the expense of any other state in the region, especially Lebanon. The United States is firm in its commitment to Lebanon's sovereignty and stability, and we expect Syria to respect Lebanon's independence as well. In recent weeks, we have seen sharp rhetorical exchanges between Hezbollah and our friends in Israel, and the Syrians have joined in on occasion. It is not in Syria's interest for new fighting to break out in Lebanon, as the fighting could escalate and involve Syria itself. We have also made it clear

to Syria that as long as it supports terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, we will maintain sanctions.

Nuclear Activities

It is incumbent on the Syrians to cooperate with the IAEA. The Syrians may want a civil nuclear energy program, but given that there is an ongoing IAEA investigation, if confirmed I would press my diplomatic colleagues in Damascus to not hold any such discussions until the current investigation has been resolved. I would also consult closely with our mission in Vienna to determine which Syrian sites are the most important for the IAEA and try to get the Syrians to permit inspections at these locations first. I would emphasize to the Syrian authorities that further delays in cooperating with the IAEA will only heighten suspicions about Syria's nuclear program and make it more difficult for them to develop credible partners in the nuclear or other energy sectors. Our ultimate approach will depend on whether Syria continues to stonewall the IAEA inspectors. We continue to consult with our international partners on possible next steps in light of the serious nature of the IAEA's findings in its most recent reports.

Human Rights

We believe that real progress on human rights in Syria is more likely to result from sustained, principled engagement, sometimes in public and sometimes in private. If confirmed, I would remind Syria that their human rights record does not help their image abroad, particularly the continuing detention of prominent activists, and I would press for their release. To gain more traction, we must acknowledge where the Syrian Government has made limited progress, such as women's rights. In areas where it is not, such as press freedom, labor rights, or treatment of the Kurdish minority for example, our public diplomacy efforts on the ground are all the more important to ensure the Syrian people are provided alternative points of view. If Syria proceeds with a WTO membership application, we will have a direct avenue to negotiate labor rights as well. While the Embassy is currently working hard to engage the Syrian public, our efforts have been underresourced for years. I believe we need a "surge" of sorts in public diplomacy, by increasing the number of our international visitor exchange programs, scholarships, youth exchanges, cultural events, English-language instruction and private American outreach to Syria.

Question. Syria continues to strengthen ties with Iran, a problematic prospect for U.S. interests in the region, particularly as we work with international partners to put pressure on Iran over its nuclear program. What are the various potential fracture points and divergent interests in the Syria-Iran relationship and what diplomatic options do you see for the U.S. in discouraging that relationship?

Answer. Syria's relationship with Iran is a complicated picture of converging interests. The relationship is primarily based on security cooperation, rather than ideological or cultural ties or complementary economies. With respect to Israel, the Syrians have a clear interest in negotiating a peace agreement for the return of the Golan Heights, whereas Iran opposes any form of peace with Israel.

For 16 years, going back to Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, the Syrian Government has said that a peace agreement with Israel, including normalized relations, could be in Syria's interest. I have never heard President Ahmadinejad of Iran say that, and it is unclear what the impact would be on the Syrian-Iranian relationship if there was genuine forward movement on an Israel-Syrian peace negotiation track.

In addition, Syria and Iran appear to have divergent goals in Iraq. Iran seeks to have a preponderant Shia Islamist influence, but the Iraqi oppositionists whom Syria backs are mainly Sunni secularists who intensely distrust Iran. Moreover, Iran has traditionally supported a decentralized (and more easily dominated) Iraqi state, while the Syrians traditionally have feared for Iraqi unity and therefore wanted a stronger central state. Above all, if confirmed, my goal would be to see the Syrians stop all infiltration of foreign fighters into Iraq who attack our soldiers. It is also important for Syria to stop promoting Iraqi oppositionists trying to bring down the constitutional state in Iraq and to build ties to the next government as a way of counterbalancing some of the Iranian influence there. Given the potential economic stakes for Damascus, there may be opportunities there, though I cannot promise fast results.

Question. The State Department's latest Human Rights Report on Syria states that the "human rights situation worsened" during the course of the past year. What do you see as the role of human rights in the U.S. diplomatic agenda for Syria and how would you raise the level of focus on this issue with the government, and our international partners, if confirmed?

Answer. As I stated in response to your first question, there are a number of approaches that we can take to improving the human rights situation in Syria. The aspirations of people in the Middle East for dignity, economic opportunity and respect for their human rights, are dear to me personally and professionally. I am proud to say that I worked hard on that issue, human rights and respect for human rights, when I was Ambassador in Algeria, and I would do so in Syria, if I am confirmed. As the just-issued State Department report on the human rights situation in Syria noted, there are very big problems there. And there is much that an ambassador could and should do to help Syrians determine how best to implement peaceful reforms and improve respect for human rights. If confirmed, one of the first steps I would undertake is to review with Syrian officials press items and reports from organizations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Committee to Protect Journalists to show the Syrian officials how badly their actions reflect on them in the West. Our Embassy should have occasional contacts with those NGOs to understand their concerns and trade points of view on the situation on the ground in Syria. If confirmed, I would also want to see our visiting officials join me in raising human rights issues, and I would highlight for select ambassador colleagues the importance of their officials also raising them. (The President of Italy is in Syria on March 18, for example.) Where it does not endanger Syrian activists, I would also seek to meet them myself or have my staff do so.

Question. How would you assess Syria's view of its role in the region? And what diplomatic tools and pressure points does our renewed diplomatic representation in Damascus provide for influencing Syria's calculations about its behavior vis-a-vis its neighbors?

Answer. While I cannot speak for another government, it is our perception that Syria would like to become an indispensable party to progress in the Levant and eventually to the Mediterranean region more broadly. Richard Haas of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York just returned from Syria last month and wrote a piece to that effect in Newsweek magazine. If linking up to the Mediterranean region is Syria's goal, then it must play a more constructive role in the region, and we can help to show it the way forward. Our strong encouragement for participation in the Middle East peace process can help to move Syria and Israel closer to negotiations, indirect or otherwise and perhaps eventually result in an end to Syrian support for Palestinian rejectionists and Hezbollah. Our strong stand in favor of Lebanese sovereignty and opposition to Syrian support for Hezbollah will reinforce improvements in the Lebanese-Syrian bilateral relationship which are already underway. On the eastern side of Syria, our outreach to Syria supports our partnership with the Government of Iraq, and has the potential to promote greater security and stability for the government about to form in Baghdad. Greater U.S. engagement with Syria has the potential to benefit other nations in the region, and our friends know that.

RESPONSES OF HON. ROBERT STEPHEN FORD TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY
SENATOR BARBARA BOXER

Question. I understand that the administration must soon renew an important Executive order (E.O.) involving Syria—E.O. 13338—which sanctions individuals and entities linked to the inner circle of the Syrian Government.

- Can you confirm that the administration will renew E.O. 13338 and not weaken it in any way?

Answer. Absent major Syrian policy changes addressing any of the various issues of concern identified in E.O. 13338, I would expect the administration to renew the national emergency in May 2010.

Question. I understand that the administration must also renew E.O. 13441 which sanctions individuals undermining the sovereignty of Lebanon or its democratic processes or institutions.

- Given that Syria is doing absolutely nothing to stem the flow of weapons into Lebanon aimed for Hezbollah, can you also confirm that the administration will renew and not weaken E.O. 13441 in any way?

Answer. Supporting the development of a sovereign, stable, and democratic Lebanon remains a priority for the United States. Absent a significant change in Syrian policy on arming Hezbollah, I would expect the administration to renew E.O. 13441 in August 2010.

Question. On February 14, 2005, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafiq al-Hariri, was murdered, along with 22 others, when a blast hit his motorcade in downtown Beirut. The blast was so powerful it left a 10-foot crater in the street.

Tens of thousands of Lebanese citizens took to the streets and accused Syria of carrying out the attack. The United States pulled then-Ambassador Margaret Scobey out of Damascus over the killing. And a U.N. Special Commission of Inquiry found links between the Syrian Government and the assassination.

Now, nearly 5 years later, the current body investigating the Hariri assassination—the U.N.-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon—has released a report stating that the prosecutor has “made significant progress toward building a case which will bring perpetrators [of the attack] to justice.”

And as I understand, Syria has not been cleared of involvement in the attack.

- How have conditions changed in Syria since 2005 that warrant restoring an ambassador?

Answer. Posting an ambassador to Damascus will allow us to pursue our national interests more effectively at the most senior levels of the Syrian Government. The diplomatic team we have in country now faces significant challenges engaging at that level, and we must rely on senior level delegations for access. To secure changes in Syrian behavior, we need to press the Syrian Government in a firm, coordinated fashion. An ambassador in Syria can orchestrate our efforts on many issues of concern, including respect for Lebanese sovereignty, arms transfers to Hezbollah, and demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese border. We must also press Syria on its tolerance for groups attempting to undermine the stability of Iraq and the need to participate constructively in the Middle East peace process. We believe that 5 years of isolation has done nothing to moderate Syria’s behavior—and in some cases, even made it worse. Syria has become more reliant on Iran as a strategic ally, which worsened prospects for Middle East peace. Engagement is a tool we use to defend and promote our national interests.

- How will the findings of the Special Tribunal impact United States-Syrian relations if the report confirms Syrian involvement?

Answer. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon is a crucial element in the effort to end impunity for political assassinations in Lebanon, and the United States support for the Tribunal remains unwavering. We have made clear that no “grand bargain” over the Tribunal will be made with Syria. The Tribunal is not a political bargaining chip, and no deals will be made at the expense of justice. As U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has affirmed, the Tribunal process is irreversible. As evidence of our continued commitment to promoting justice in Lebanon, the United States has contributed \$20 million for the first 2 years of the Tribunal’s operations and expects to remain a significant contributor going forward. Prosecutor Bellemare and his staff are conducting professional, methodical work and we have every expectation they will accomplish their goals.

RESPONSES OF HON. ROBERT STEPHEN FORD TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY
SENATOR KIRSTEN E. GILLIBRAND

Question. Syria Sanctions: While the Syria Accountability Act (SAA) has had an impact, it has not deterred Syria from supporting terrorist groups like Hezbollah and seeking closer relations with Iran. In fact, recent events, such as the February meeting between Bashar al-Asad and Ahmadinejad with the leadership of Hezbollah, suggest that Syria is moving further away from moderating its foreign policy.

- Other than the SAA, what other forceful measures can the U.S. take that would strengthen the message that supporting terrorists groups not only undermines our bilateral relationship but also destabilizes the region?

Answer. As you point out, sanctions have not been successful in bringing about change in Syrian policies with respect to terrorist groups and Iran. The most effective measure the U.S. could take to lessen Syria’s support for terrorist groups and change its relationship with Iran is to bring Syria closer to a peace treaty with Israel. Not only do the terrorist groups and Iran not share Syria’s interest in comprehensive Middle East peace, but such a peace treaty would require Syria to fundamentally alter its relationships with those entities. If confirmed, I would work closely with Special Envoy Mitchell and his team to create the conditions for testing Syria’s willingness and ability to make peace with Israel. Part of this would involve convincing the Syrians of the economic and security benefits of a peace deal that would include ending Syrian support for terrorist groups.

Question. Israel: In spite of statements about wanting to negotiate peace with Israel through Turkish mediation, the Syrian regime never does enough to show that it is serious about finalizing negotiations over the Golan Heights.

- How will having a U.S. Ambassador in place impact these negotiations? What near-term steps are we seeking from Syria on these negotiations?

Answer. Currently, our access to the Syrian President and Foreign Minister is limited to those occasions when Special Envoy Mitchell or other senior diplomats visit Damascus. Having a U.S. Ambassador in place would establish a channel for more frequent and responsive communication with the top Syrian leadership. Sending an ambassador also increases our credibility as mediators. In the near term, Special Envoy Mitchell and his team are working on a formula to restart negotiations that would satisfy both Israeli and Syrian political requirements. If confirmed, I would seek to convince the Syrians to stop unhelpful media statements and the media broadcasts they make (often anti-Semitic) as a means of convincing us and the Israelis that the government in Damascus is serious.

Question. Iran: Historically, Syria and Iran were united by their distrust of Iraq. In recent years, Syria has moved further away from the West and closer to Iran. Iranian commercial investment in Syria has increased significantly in the last 5 years, but ironically, trade with Iran remains lower than Syria's paltry trade levels with the U.S. on allowed goods. In November 2009, Israeli forces seized a ship en route from Iran to Syria carrying thousands of rockets, bombs, grenades, and other weapons. Syria is viewed as a proxy of Iran, particularly with regard to providing material and other support to Hamas and Hezbollah.

- Do you believe that having a U.S. Ambassador in Damascus will help us separate Iran and Syria? What specific signals are you seeking?

Answer. I think we should be realistic about the degree to which the presence of a U.S. Ambassador can impact the strategic relationship between Syria and Iran. At the same time, elevating our diplomatic representation will allow us to engage the Syrians in areas where we believe their interests and Iran's interests diverge, such as Iraq and a possible peace agreement with Israel. If confirmed, I would also be in position to deliver a strong message to the Syrian leadership about the potential perils of their Iranian alliance in any regional conflict, and the gains, economic, security and political, to be had from a comprehensive peace agreement.

Question. Iran: After hosting Under Secretary of State William Burns in Damascus in February, President Asad held a joint press conference later in the month with Iranian President Ahmadinejad, where they both criticized Israel and U.S. policy in the Middle East and then held a meeting with the leadership of Lebanese Hezbollah.

- If you had already been at your post, how would you have reacted (to President Asad's joint press conference later in the month with Iranian President Ahmadinejad, and their meeting with the leadership of Lebanese Hezbollah)?

Answer. While the tripartite press conference presented a repugnant optic, I find it illustrative of the nature of the Syrian-Iranian relationship that Under Secretary Burns' visit may have prompted the Iranian head of state to request a public reassurance from Damascus. If I had already been at Post when this meeting occurred, I would have advised the Syrian leadership that such gratuitous statements are incredibly short-sighted—as they undermined Syria's long-held contention that it wants a comprehensive Middle East peace and damaged the positive momentum resulting from the Under Secretary's visit. I would also have sought similar messages to the Syrians from the ambassadors of some of our friends in the region to drive that point home.

Question. Syria's Nuclear Program: At a conference organized last week by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Mekdad, announced that Syria was seeking to develop alternate energy sources including civilian nuclear power. I am very concerned with this announcement especially given the fact that Syria has refused to fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over its investigation into the suspected nuclear facility that Israel destroyed in Syria 2 years ago.

- As Iran continues to pose such a grave threat with its secret nuclear program, what steps do we need to take to ensure that Syria does not follow Iran's example but cooperates fully with the IAEA over any actions to develop civilian nuclear energy?

Answer. I believe that it would be inappropriate for the international community to consider offering Syria assistance with a civilian nuclear energy project while

Syria remains subject to an on-going IAEA investigation. The U.S. will support the IAEA exercising the full-range of its authorities to obtain Syrian cooperation with its requests for access and information required to resolve the outstanding questions about Syria's nuclear activities. If confirmed, I intend to try to persuade Syrian leaders that it is in Syria's long-term national interest to comply with the IAEA's demands, which I believe can be done in a manner that maintains Syria's security and dignity.

Question. Syria is an acknowledged supporter—together with Iran—of Hezbollah. This terrorist organization destabilizes Lebanon, has waged war on Israel and continues to amass weapons to be used against Israel in the future.

- Lebanon: Has the U.S. proposed to Syria that it halt sending weapons to Hezbollah in return for gaining a U.S. ambassadorship?

Answer. The U.S. has repeatedly used bilateral and multilateral pressure to stop Syria's arms shipments to Hezbollah, and will continue to do so until Syria has fulfilled its obligations under UNSC Resolutions 1701, 1680, and 1559. We believe the most effective measure the U.S. could take to lessen Syria's support for Hezbollah is to bring Syria closer to a peace treaty with Israel, something I would work on with Special Envoy Mitchell and his team if I am confirmed.

Question. Lebanon: What steps are you seeking from Syria that will signal that government's willingness to decrease its interference in Lebanon's affairs?

Answer. We want to see Syria honor the commitments made to Prime Minister Hariri during his December visit to Damascus, such as appointing and beginning the work of a border delineation committee. And of course we want to see the Syrians stop the shipment of weapons to Hezbollah and Palestinian extremists in Lebanon. The Syrians should cooperate with the Lebanese state, including helping ensure that the Lebanese state has a monopoly of force in the country.

Question. Iraq: Syria has been a transit point for foreign fighters and weapons heading into Iraq to support the Sunnis. Iraqi PM Maliki continues to denounce Syrian support for extremist activities in Iraq. While Syria initially cooperated with the U.S. after 9/11, after the invasion of Iraq, the Syrian regime has been less than cooperative with regard to the border security of Iraq.

- What do you see as the possibility for improving Syria's role vis-a-vis Iraq to allow U.S. troops to withdraw on the timeline outlined by President Obama?

Answer. I believe that Iraq presents a real area of opportunity for the U.S. and Syria to make progress in the near term. Syria has real national interests in improved economic relations with Iraq and a strong government that will ensure the unity of the Iraqi state. The Syrians have made some progress in suppressing the networks that infiltrate foreign fighters into Iraq, but they can do more—and if confirmed, I would press them on this. We also believe that it would be possible—and indeed in Syria's own interest—for Syria to cease its support for former Iraqi Baathists and Iraqi Islamists who live in Syria and undertake activities that are destabilizing to the constitutional government in Iraq.

Question. LGBT Refugees: LGBT refugees fleeing Iraq, Iran and other nations in the region go to Syria as one of the countries of first asylum where they await the interview process that allows them to move on to permanent safety in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere.

- As a new Ambassador, will you ensure that all Embassy staff are sensitized to the issues facing the LGBT community and that local staff and translators employed by the Embassy treat LGBT refugees with appropriate sensitivity?

Answer. If confirmed, I intend to make the promotion of human rights a central theme of my diplomacy. Consequently, I believe the U.S. Embassy should set the example in Syria for respecting the human rights of all the people we serve, including those in the vulnerable LGBT refugee population.

Question. I understand that U.S. refugee processing is hampered by Syria's stalling on issuance of visas to U.S. Government personnel. This is very disconcerting to me and my colleagues and I urge you to make this a priority for discussion of modest steps that Syria's Government can take in response to our move of improving diplomatic relations.

Answer. As I stated in my hearing, the U.S. has stepped up wonderfully to its moral obligation to help Iraqi refugees, including persons who are in danger in Iraq because of their work with us. It is my understanding that Under Secretary Burns recently raised our shared concerns over the delays in issuing Syrian visas to U.S. Immigration Officers with Vice Foreign Minister Faysal Miqdad, who has decision-making authority on this portfolio. The delays in receiving visas have only recently recurred; during the latter half of 2008 and most of 2009, DHS circuit riders did receive visas in time for travel. I agree that this is a modest step the Syrians could take to build confidence, and if confirmed, I would make it a priority in my discussions.

