

Meeting of Ambassador Robert Ford with the Syrian-American community, June 22, 2012, Beverley Hills, Michigan. Notes by Ron Stockton.

Note that there are two main opposition groups, The National Coordination Committee (NCC) and the Syrian National Committee (SNC), based in Istanbul. SNC is linked to the Free Syrian Army and has called for Western intervention. It is said to have heavy Muslim Brotherhood influence. It appears to be getting most of the attention (and arms).

Ford was with Congressman Gary Peters, who was praised highly by the organizers of the event for keeping Syrian on the front burner. Peters introduced him. Ford was originally from Denver. He has a degree from Johns Hopkins. Speaks several languages, including fluent Arabic. He served in Morocco in the Peace Corps. His wife is in the foreign service. He is modest by demeanor and manner and voice. He was candid but not confrontational. He had glasses, a blue suit, and bright red tie. There were perhaps 200 people present. The panel was chaired by a Syrian moderator: He is in his 30s, a strong-looking, confident, forceful person able to maintain order and allow all individuals to speak. He stayed neutral throughout. Introduction: I want to thank the Ambassador for going into Hama. That was very courageous. It showed the world what was happening there. To the audience, keep your questions short. Don't tell him what is happening in Syrian. He is fluent in Arabic and knows more than any of us. If you don't like what others say, please respect their right to speak. We are a democracy. Let us be an example to the Assad regime by showing that we allow discussion that they do not allow. (Audience cheers).

Ambassador begins by saying "We will not stop until Bashar al Assad is gone." Then he said, let me repeat this in Arabic for those who may not be fluent in English. He said the US has four policy goals. 1. Stop the violence. 2. Start a political transition. 3. Produce a representative government with respect for human rights. 4. The Assad family has to leave power.

The US works unilaterally and multilaterally. 1. Aid: 1.5 million Syrians need assistance. 1.0 million have fled their homes. 80,000 are in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Some are even fleeing into Iraq. We have given \$53m in aid this year, most to Lebanon. It is not enough, but every dollar we give has to be taken from other programs in Africa, Latin America, Asia. 2. Sanctions: There are no oil purchases, no bank ties. This is causing serious problems for the regime. 3. Support. We are helping local coordination committees. The US is sending "non-lethal" help to a "political" opposition. The story in the NYT that the CIA is shipping in weapons, "It is not accurate. I want to emphasize that we are not sending weapons."

This is a tragedy, the worst we have seen in ten years. "There is no easy solution."

We are preparing war crimes trials.

Al Qaeda is definitely there. Assad is not the solution to Al Qaeda. People are turning to it because of Assad. He is a part of the Al Qaeda problem, not the solution to it.



The Russians have vetoed UN resolutions twice. If they veto a third time, "we will work outside of the UN." He refers to our partners in the area: Turkey, the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, nor mentioned by name).

When I became Ambassador, there was one specialist dealing with Syria. Now there are eight.

We are not sending in troops. That is not off the table, but not now.

“Little by little the government is losing.” Syrian forces are losing in Idlib, Aleppo., Homs, Hama, Deir al Zor, parts of Damascus. They are losing the countryside. They are running out of money. They have spent half their reserves. The Russians sell weapons for cash.

Q: I want to praise you for going into Hama (Note: this is a set up for a criticism), but why are you not doing more? Person calls for a more activist US policy, to send weapons, give military support via a no fly zone on the Turkish border. (Cheers).

A: There *are* weapons going into Syria. Last week Secretary of Defense Panetta confirmed this when he spoke to Congress. He expressed concerns that of the groups fighting the government, we don't know their agenda after Assad goes. We ask questions but are not getting good answers. Other countries are sending weapons. We do not block weapons but do not send them. Regarding a no fly zone, neither Turkey nor Jordan has done this. The US no fly zone in Iraq lasted twelve years and was only ended with an invasion and an eight year war. Deploying American forces is harder than it seems.

A: I met with the Syrian National Council in Turkey recently. They are a legitimate opposition group. There are also other legitimate opposition groups. We need a united group with a commitment to human rights and a transition plan to a representative political system.

A: You praise me for going to Hama. You should praise Colonel Harmoush (?), who took me there. He disappeared and may be dead. His family have been killed.

Comment: At one point the ambassador responded to a passionate statement by suggesting that we should move beyond emotion to address the issues. This was the only time I twitched, thinking that maybe this was not well put. When someone responded that this is very emotional for us, the ambassador also responded. He waited until another question had passed so as not to be confrontational, but then said, This is very emotional for me. I was in Iraq for 2 ½ years. I know American soldiers who were killed and a diplomat who was killed. I take American involvement personally. (Tony Blair said in his memoir that Vice President Cheney was very hard line and wanted to clean out all of the militant regimes in the region. Had the Iraq invasion gone well, he would have struck into Syria. I remember well being in the UK and hearing a statement by Tony Blair that Britain was committed to the Iraq war but if anyone--guess who?--wanted to go into another country, they would go in without Britain).

Comment: The audience were activist. They wanted US action and were frustrated at US caution. At times they expressed frustration, often mumbling to each other. The ambassador listened attentively, then always stood to respond, as if to express how seriously he viewed the question. A few times, he asked people who had made a rhetorical statement to explain specifically what they wanted. Then he responded, stating US policy. He was always very focused on policy, which is his job. The comment on not getting good answers from opposition groups was a subtle but powerful critique of those in the room, that the Syrian opposition needs to get its act together before they ask us to get entangled further. The statement about how difficult it is to solve a problem militarily is also a statement of US policy. Note: He did not use phrases like “get your act together.” That is my paraphrase of the essence of his message.

Q: Request for more support for NGOs.

A: We are working with NGOs and are training Syrian NGOs to enter Syria when Assad is gone. Many are based in Turkey but some in the US. The Turks do not know western NGOs and would prefer not to have those from foreign countries. A problem is that there are so many we cannot help them. The Syrian medical association in Michigan is preparing a program. (They were prominent in the audience). We will help them, but you should combine your efforts into one group. Because of our boycott of Syria, we have to get a waiver for groups that ship goods into Syria. This would make it easier to get Commerce Department approval, which is bureaucratically complex. We will help, but you have to help us make it work.

Comment: This is a dilemma. In the past, the US has been accused of manipulating events from behind the scene through the NGOs, that they are fronts for US power. He was open that we are training Syrian groups in the US. Some will see this in a negative way. If we support then, we are accused, if we do not we are accused. Lose-lose.

Q: Family members are having trouble getting Temporary Protected Status (TPS) which allows them to come to the US until the fighting ends.

A: I was not aware of these problems. We cannot change visa law, but we can work to address the problem. Send a message to my aide and we will deal with it.

Q: An Assad supporter says he is an American, born here. He thinks Obama's policy is appalling, unconstitutional and hypocritical. What if Assad called for Obama to leave? Obama has 39% popularity rating. (I am not sure where he got that figure). He has wrecked the economy, declared unconstitutional wars, etc. What if Assad sent in arms, and instigated car bombings in American cities? During our civil war, Lincoln killed his own people and is now a hero with a statue in Washington and his face on currency.

Comment: While the audience was overwhelmingly anti-Assad, I knew there were people who supported that regime. I was waiting for someone to express views such as this. At this point, there was shouting. The person in front of me was near apoplectic. The moderator had to remind people that this was a democracy and that we should show the Assad regime that we will tolerate unpopular views even though they will not. This comment brought cheers. The man in front of me was calmed, and the speaker and two or three people with him walked out. Given the strong reaction from the audience, the moderator appeared willing to move on to another question, but (before the walkout) the Ambassador responded in a thoughtful way that explained US policy:

A: The ambassador says the Syrian government raises some of these same concerns, and he would like to explain how he answers those points. The UN has a Declaration of Human Rights. Syria signed it in 1948. It requires that all states allow free expression and other rights. The UN Commission on Human Rights has declared that Syria is in violation of all of those rights.

Q: Why is the leader of the Free world hiding behind Russia? You always say you cannot act because Putin has refused. Why do you not act on your own?

Q: The American media always talk about the rights of minorities. Why do they not talk about the rights of the majority?

A: I am well aware of the 70% and of what the Sunnis suffer, but let us consider the question of minorities. Who supports Assad the most? Frightened Alawis and frightened Christians. If they abandon Assad it will be easier to get rid of him. The way to produce this is to reassure them that they will not be attacked after he is gone. They are acting out of fear, not because they support him. There have been incidents of Christian and Alawi families massacred, their homes burned

and families killed. There have also been Sunnis attacked, but if you want the Christians and Alawis to abandon Assad you have to reassure them that they will not become victims.

Comment: By a specific reference to the Sunnis (most of the audience), and also to the Christians and Alawis, the Ambassador put the ethnic/sectarian issue directly onto the table. He is surely thinking of the Christian population of Iraq, which was decimated by the US invasion. Perhaps a million are living in Syria itself. The Christians are terrified of what could come next. (This is also true in Jordan, with its much smaller Christian population) and even in Egypt, where Christians have been attacked. The US is insisting on an unequivocal commitment to minority rights, which they have heard rhetorically from opposition groups but not convincingly. Again, the Ambassador threw the ball back into the Syrian court: You must act before we will act.

A: Regarding Russia. We are definitely not hiding behind Russia. The President spent half an hour talking to Putin last week about Syria. Secretary Clinton talks to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov twice a week, and the President calls Putin frequently. The strong words they have said in public are repeated in private. If Russia vetoes a third UN resolution, we will work outside of the UN. (He repeated this phrase several times in the evening). But Putin says he wants to make sure that Syria will not experience instability. When he says to the President that the Syrian opposition forces are not united and are not clear on what will come after Assad is gone, we do not have an answer. (Note: Again, he throws the ball back into the Syrian court).

Q: Why does China support Russia?

A: China is supporting Russia. They vetoed UN resolutions twice. There are different reasons for this. They have some oil interests in eastern Syria. They are also not a democracy, and are uneasy about a regime being condemned because it is not a democracy. They do not like hearing criticisms of human rights issues. They could be next. They feel insecure.

Q: The US took down Saddam. Why not Assad?

A: The recent incident of the Russian ship with helicopters going from Kaliningrad to Syria is an example of how we work. It was passing by Britain, which could not stop it because it was in international waters. But the British discovered that the ship was insured by a British company. They cancelled the insurance, and the ship turned back.

US Policy: This is my summary of the points I heard, many stated diplomatically so you had to listen carefully to hear what he was saying.

The Assad regime has to go. We are not going to change on this.

The sanctions are working. The regime is nearly out of money. They have exhausted half their resources. The Russians do not give weapons. They sell for cash in advance.

Let's be realistic: This is very difficult. There are no easy solutions. Every choice involves costs. We are a big powerful country but we can't do everything Assad's opponents want us to do.

We are not going to do more until the Syrian opposition gets its act together and we can see what will come after Assad. Right now, we are not convinced.

We are not going to confront Russia over this. If we start sending in weapons to counter the weapons the Russians are selling to Syria, this will turn it into an American-Russian issue, which we do not want. We have close ties with Russia, and interests, and want to work with them

We are not going to get involved militarily. Mention of Iraq. We are not going to send American troops or the American air force.

We are concerned about stability after Assad. So far, we are not reassured.

We are concerned about minorities, Christians, Alawi. If the removal of Assad led to massacres and expulsions, this is not acceptable. We need assurances up front. Words are not enough.

We are preparing War Crimes trials. (I was surprised by this. If the goal is to get rid of Assad, then let him go without consequences. This seems counter to Goal 1. Will this be modified?) .

I know you have family members who are in danger. We will do everything we can in the humanitarian realm. But we have national interests that we have to consider. This is only one problem in a big complex world.

You have to get your act together before we can help. He made this point several times.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov just published a piece in the *HuffPost Impact UK* (“Russia’s Syria Policy. On the Right Side of History,” June 21) outlining Russian policy. I was struck by how close it sounds to US policy. 1. There should be a political transition. We are not committed to this regime. 2. This is not simple and no options are perfect. 3. Human rights issues are a grave concern. Christian minorities are at risk if the regime changes in the wrong way. 4. There is a danger of destabilization if the transition is done badly. 5. There are large majorities of the Syrian population who support a non-revolutionary transition. Emphasizing human rights and abuses by the regime overlook this reality. 6. A civil war would be a catastrophe. 7. We do not trust UN resolutions. They affirm principles that are then used to justify military intervention. We will not support that. 7. We need a cooperative international effort to produce a transition that stabilizes the country, not one that would destabilize it.

My suspicion is that the US and Russia will be able to work out something.

Some quotes from Lavrov:

The Arab spring created “a zone of turbulence.” There are two approaches to this reality: let the Arab people work out their future or “take advantage of the softening of state structures that had long been too rigid” to remake them from outside.

Russia’s policy is 1. Encourage the aspirations of the Arab people 2. oppose the use of violence and 3. Remember “that the transformation of a society is a complex and generally long process which rarely goes smoothly.”

“Russia probably knows the true cost of revolutions better than most other countries. We are fully aware that revolutionary changes are always accompanied by social and economic setbacks as well as by loss of human life and suffering. This is exactly why we support an evolutionary and peaceful way of enacting long-awaited changes in the Middle East and North Africa.”

Efforts to use outside force in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya make the point.

“Unfortunately, qualified and honest analysis of developments in Syria and their potential consequences is still in short supply.” We are subjected to “primitive images and black-and-white propaganda clichés.”

“Syria is a multi-confessional state. In addition to Sunni and Shia Muslims there are Alawites, Orthodox and other Christian confessions, Druzes, and Kurds. Over the last few decades of the secular rule of the Ba’ath party, freedom of conscience has been practiced in Syria and religious minorities fear that if the regime is broken down this tradition may be interrupted.”

“Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms has traditionally been, and continues to be, a major problem for the States of the Middle East, and was one of the main causes of the ‘Arab revolutions.’”

“we must press for a ceasefire in the first place, and promote the start of an inclusive all-Syrian dialogue aimed at negotiating a peaceful crisis settlement formula by the Syrians themselves.”

It is quite clear to us and to all with sufficient information “that pressing for an immediate ousting of Bashar-al-Assad, contrary to the aspirations of a considerable segment of the Syrian society that still relies on this regime for its security and well-being, would mean plunging Syria into a protracted and bloody civil war.”

“Taking into account today’s realities in Syria, reliance on one-sided support for the opposition, particularly for its most belligerent part, will not lead to peace.”

Some of the anti-Assad movement is “targeting Iran.” Countries such as Israel, Turkey and some States in the region” are “interested in weakening that country’s regional positions.” But a military strike against Iran “would lead to grave, catastrophic consequences.”

Fueling intra-Syria strife would trigger a process that would “affect the situation in the vast territory surrounding Syria in the most negative way, having a devastating impact on both regional and international security.” The problem would spill out of Syria, worsen the situation in Lebanon and other countries. “weapons falling into the ‘wrong hands,’ including those of terrorist organizations, and perhaps the most dangerous of all, an aggravation of inter-faith tensions and contradictions in side the Islamic world.”

Samuel Huntington observed the “increasing importance of identity based on civilization and religion in the age of globalization; he also convincingly demonstrated the relative reduction in the abilities of the historic West to spread its influence.” It is impossible to ignore this trend.

We need a universal scale of values and morals, not one based on ”concepts of morals that would satisfy one group and violate the natural rights of other citizens, particularly of those who belong to other confessions.”

“Using a ‘sanctions bat’ leads to a dead-end at all times.”

We must seek “a mutually acceptable compromise” under international auspices.

The Syrian National Council is calling for foreign intervention. Not good.

We must keep the Middle East from “sliding into the abyss of wars and anarchy” and “stay on the right side of history.”

After Facebook discussion, I posted the following update summarizing my impressions.

First, Ford was very focused on American interests. He was an American official explaining American policy. It was not a debate or an argument but a statement of policy. And the policy he described was *real politic*. He seemed sincere in his concerns about the humanitarian situation but his American-centric approach left some of the Syrians cold because he approached Syria from this country's perspective, not from Syria's perspective. Lavrov made this point even better. He said that if this situation goes south, the whole region will suffer and be destabilized. There will be "a devastating impact on both regional and international security" including the Israeli-Syrian situation, the Lebanese situation, terrorists getting weapons, and "perhaps the most dangerous of all, an aggravation of inter-faith tensions and contradictions inside the Islamic world." Wow! That is scary. We can just think of 200,000 or more Christian refugees pouring into Lebanon, and many hundreds of thousands of Alawis and others pouring into Turkey or Jordan. Would Turkey and Jordan just sit there and let that happen? Perhaps *real politic* is a better way to make foreign policy than the humanitarian approach. When a giant country starts trying to do good, we end up creating chaos. We also end up being accused of double standards, hypocrisy, and deceit (which I happen to think is sometimes the case). Maybe the humanitarian interest is sometimes best served by *real politic*. (Note: Obama has people in his administration who are definitely on the humanitarian side and would strongly disagree with my point. We cannot tell at this point how this is going to work out).

Second, Ford made it clear that this is not 2003. He was very non-partisan (a Bush appointee) but made it clear that we were burned and bankrupted by Iraq and Afghanistan and are not getting involved in another war, even if that regime deserves to be overthrown. And we are not going to do what we did in Iraq, replace something with nothing, with consequences unforeseeable. Tony Blair reported in his memoir that Vice President Cheney wanted to send the US army into Syria as soon as Saddam was overthrown. Blair said if that happened, Britain would not be there. Listening to the American political debate over Syria, it seems that if there were a Republican administration in office, we would be far more likely to take military action. This is a legitimate debate, but I felt reassured by the Ambassador's statements of caution and restraint.

Alas, if you are a Syrian watching your people suffer big time, these are words of abandonment. (It was interesting that both supporters of the regime and its opponents were so upset that they walked out in protest). I don't see it quite that way. The Ambassador made it clear that other countries are shipping in weapons and we are coordinating with others. He felt that we had a strong policy. One point he did not make but I will. The three key state actors (Russia, Turkey and the US) seem in agreement that there needs to be a political transition. Turkey and the US have decided that Assad himself must go. Lavrov is more cautious but not opposed. (I remember once hearing an American diplomat say about the Congo's then dictator, in the midst of an uprising, that "Mobutu is not our chosen instrument." It was cold, imperial, chilling, brutal). Of course, since Mobutu had been our chosen instrument once this gave us considerable leverage.

This anecdote is a segue to one last point. The primary players in this situation are Turkey and Russia. Both have close ties with the regime. Both are frustrated and alienated from their former ally. The Turks are openly calling for the removal of the regime (and having Syria shoot down their plane this week did not help). We are really outsiders, and we are not nearly as smart or influential as people in the Arab world think we are. Our leverage is our enormous military capability (which many countries want to use for their own purposes. Think of the Israelis and Iran). Ford was very clear that while military operations are not off the table (his words) they are not under consideration at this point. The NYT article this week described various military plans being developed, but US officials in the story said these were contingency plans. Ford said the NYT story was "inaccurate." His voice was emphatic but his meaning ambiguous. Was everything inaccurate or just parts? It is what diplomats call creative ambiguity.