



PRESS RELEASE

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Statement of Senator John Kerry Following his Meeting with President Al-Assad in Damascus

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Good morning. Hello everybody. Well thank you very much. It's a great pleasure to be here, to be back in Damascus and to have the opportunity to have a long and comprehensive discussion with President Al-Assad. I have long advocated American engagement with Syria and I am very committed to working on a continued effort to achieve progress in our bilateral relationship. Syria is an essential player in bringing peace and stability to the region. Both the United States and Syria have a very deep interest, a mutual interest in having a very frank exchange on any differences that may exist, but also on the many, many agreements that we have about the possibilities of peace in this region. There are many places where we have the ability to be able to find an ability to work together. The Obama Administration's decision to send an ambassador to Damascus is evidence that engagement with Syria is a priority at the highest levels of our government, and Secretary Burns' visit here and this visit and others are testimony to that. I chaired Ambassador-Designate Ford's hearing just a few weeks ago, and I can say with full confidence my belief that he will be an excellent representative of the President's policies and an outstanding envoy to the Syrian government. And I told President Al-Assad that President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and I are committed to making his nomination move through the Senate as rapidly as possible.

President Al-Assad and I had a very positive discussion on the formidable challenges that are facing this region, and we found agreement on a number of ways in which both of us and other countries can contribute significantly to changing the dynamics that exist today. Our goal is to work through some of the outstanding, long-term issues that have been exploited by some and some which are very, very real and make an enormous difference to the lives of people here. We believe we can work through those differences in order to promote peace, stability, and prosperity. As I said in Ambassador Ford's confirmation hearing, I said this at that time, and I say it now: There are things that the United States can do, there are things that Syria can do, there are things that Israel can do, Turkey can do, some are unilateral, some are multilateral, but all of us have to work together in order to seize real opportunities.

Time is everybody's enemy. This is a country, Syria, which is growing very, very rapidly. There are many young people who need jobs, who need to know that there is a future for them. It's in the interest of all of us to make sure that we are addressing those kinds of concerns. I know the President is deeply concerned, President Al-Assad, about how to meet those challenges. We also remain deeply concerned about the flow of weapons in this area, through

this area, to Hezbollah. That is something that must stop in order to promote regional stability and security. The United States supports Syria's efforts to improve diplomatic and people-to-people relations in Lebanon. I stopped in Lebanon yesterday and met with Prime Minister Hariri, who I know will be visiting again here. I think that the progress between Syria and Lebanon and others is important, and it contributes significantly to the possibilities for a transition to peace. And I hope that Prime Minister Hariri's next visit here will continue the progress in that direction.

So finally let me just say that I am convinced, and it's why I come back here, and it's why I am engaged in this effort. I am absolutely convinced after twenty-six years in the United States Senate and now serving as Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, I am convinced that carefully calibrated diplomacy, that if that is what we engage in, that Syria will play a very important role in achieving a comprehensive peace in the region and in putting an end to the five decades of conflict that have plagued everybody in this region. That's our hope, that's our challenge, and we're committed to continue to work at it. Thank you very, very much. And I apologize that I can't take questions, but they've got me running on a very, very tight schedule - I'm sorry.

Thank you