

U.S. Congress Team Tackles Military Assistance to Lebanon

Contributed by Naharnet, Yalibnan, Agencies
 Sunday, 01 February 2009
 Last Updated Sunday, 01 February 2009

U.S. delegation in Lebanon and Syria to push for ME peace

U.S. Congress Team Tackles Military Assistance to Lebanon

U.S. Congress members on Friday discussed with Lebanese officials military assistance to the Lebanese Army, a U.S. embassy statement reported.

It said seven members of the House of Representatives of the U.S. Congress, who serve on the House Armed Services Committee and House Foreign Affairs Committee, took part in the talks with President Michel Suleiman, Defense Minister Elias Murr and Army Commander Gen. Jean Qahwaji.

The seven-member bipartisan team included Adam Smith (Democrat – Washington State), Susan Davis (Democrat – California), Ted Poe (Republican – Texas), Gabrielle Giffords (Democrat – Arizona), C. A. Dutch Ruppersberger (Democrat – Maryland), Glenn Nye (Democrat – Virginia), and Frank Kratovil (Democrat – Maryland), according to the statement.

It said the team, accompanied by Ambassador Michele Sison, discussed the over 410-million-dollar U.S. military assistance program to the LAF and U.S. plans to continue to upgrade the LAF's capabilities.

"The United States is committed to building Lebanese state institutions and it will continue to support the government of Lebanon as it continues to safeguard the peace, unity and sovereignty of Lebanon," the statement noted.

Beirut, 30 Jan 09, 20:43

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/Lebanon/>

5A7919F6D43D246BC225754E00662186?OpenDocument

U.S. delegation in Lebanon and Syria to push for ME peace
 Published: Saturday, 31 January, 2009 @ 1:11 AM in Beirut

Beirut - A U.S. Congressional delegation was to arrive in Damascus Friday night in what could be the start to a new chapter in Syria - U.S. relations. The delegation arrived Friday in Beirut and headed straight to Baabda Palace to meet with Lebanese president Michel Suleiman .

After meeting with Suleiman , the delegation, accompanied by US ambassador in Lebanon Michele J. Sison met with Defense Minister Elias Murr and Army chief General Jean Kahwaji to discuss the situation in Lebanon and the region.

The delegation departed from Beirut around 10 :00 PM Friday and headed to Damascus

After years of disregard by George W. Bush, President Bashar al-Assad is hoping Barack Obama will bring Syria into the diplomatic fold, genuinely engaging Israel's neighbor in the effort to bring lasting stability to the Middle East.

Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wa., was heading the delegation of House Armed Services Committee members dispatched by the Obama administration, which seems keen to push the Mideast peace agenda, according to diplomats in Damascus.

They said the delegation was to hold talks with senior Syrian officials on how to further bilateral relations between the two countries in advance of a visit next month by Rep. Howard Berman, D-Ca., the chairman of the of House Foreign Affairs Committee.

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus confirmed that the delegation was to arrive Friday evening.

Syria, which has good relations with a broad range of actors in the Palestinian, Iraqi and Lebanese political arenas, could

contribute a lot to any international push to build a stable peace in the region.

Syria's relations with the U.S. struggled under President Bush, who frequently accused Damascus of allowing people and weapons across their border into Iraq to fight American troops.

However, since the American change of power, Assad has shown cautious optimism, telling Al-Manar television (operated by the Lebanon-based Hezbollah militant group) that a "serious" joint dialogue has already been initiated.

"We have positive indications, but we learned to be careful. As long as there are no tangible results, we have to assume that things have not changed," he said.

Damascus suspended its indirect talks with Israel to protest the Jewish state's 22-day military operation in the Gaza Strip aimed at Hamas militants. The assault left about 1,300 Palestinians dead, half of them women and children, and many more wounded.

Neither side has ruled out a resumption of the talks, which focused on the future of the occupied Golan Heights, but they remained on hold Friday.

The Gaza offensive also brought increased calls from voices in the West to engage Hamas, which has the backing of Syria, although that group still refuses to abandon its armed resistance or to recognize Israel. Those conditions must be met before the U.S. or the E.U. are even willing (officially) to speak to Hamas.

Syrian officials have indicated that the international community would need Syria's help if it wished to engage rather than shun the militant Palestinian group.

"It is true Hamas should be engaged; there are new realities on the ground. The Islamic group has managed to stick to its commitment to resist and clinch to its stances despite the apparent heavy losses it sustained, it is still able to fire rockets into south Israel and the Israeli soldier it kidnapped three years ago is still in captivity," says Syrian political analyst Ahmad Fathi.

France, in fact, has started the ball rolling. Former Foreign Minister Jean Francois-Poncet and another Parliamentarian recently met Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, behind closed doors, according to Western diplomats.

http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2009/01/us_delegation_i.php

The visiting US congressional delegation, accompanied by US ambassador in Lebanon Michele J. Sison meeting with Defense Minister Elias Murr

Assad calls for 'constructive' dialogue with US

Syrian President seeks dialogue with United States based on common interests, mutual respect.

DAMASCUS - Syrian President Bashar al-Assad told a visiting US delegation on Saturday that he wants a "constructive" dialogue with Washington after years of hostility, the official SANA news agency reported.

Assad told Congressman Adam Smith of the "importance of the opening of a positive and constructive dialogue between Syria and the United States based on common interests and mutual respect," it said.

SANA said members of the US delegation in turn highlighted "Syria's important role in the Middle East and the desire of the new administration to develop American-Syrian relations for the benefit of regional stability."

Syria's relations with the United States soured under the former administration of president George W. Bush.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=30159>

Syria's Assad calls for 'positive' dialogue with U.S.
By The Associated Press

The Syrian president is calling for a positive dialogue with Washington whose relations with Damascus have long been strained.

Syria's official news agency reports Bashar Assad spoke Saturday with a U.S. congressional team visiting Damascus.

Assad stressed that talks with the United States should be based on common interests and mutual respect.

Syrian-U.S. relations deteriorated sharply during the administration of former President George W. Bush, which accused Syria of allowing foreign fighters to cross its border into Iraq.

Washington also pulled its Syrian ambassador after the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Damascus was accused of being involved in the killing but has denied the accusation.

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1060325.html>

Al-Assad underscores importance of positive, constructive dialogue with US
Politics 1/31/2009 1:31:00 PM

DAMASCUS, Jan 31 (KUNA) -- Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad underscored Saturday the importance of positive and constructive dialogue between his country and the US, based on mutual respect and common interests.

This came in a presidential statement issued following the president's meeting with a US Congress delegation, headed by Congressman Adam Smith.

According to the statement, the two sides discussed bilateral relations and means to broaden them.

The Syrian president also briefed the delegation on his country's vision pertaining to the Middle East, especially following the Israeli aggression on Gaza Strip.

The US delegation was quoted as having reaffirmed the important role played by Syria in the region, and said that the new US Administration looked forward to developing US-Syrian relations in the interest of peace in the Middle East.

The meeting was attended by Foreign Minister Walid Al-Muallem and the President's Political and Media Advisor Buthaina Shaaban. (end) tk.ema KUNA 311331 Jan 09NNNN

<http://www.kuna.net.kw/NewsAgenciesPublicSite/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=1972417&Language=en>

A senior US Congress delegation arrives in Syria
Middle East News

Jan 30, 2009, 18:52 GMT

Damascus - A delegation from the US Congress arrived in Damascus late Friday for talks with the Syrian officials, a US Embassy spokesman told Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa.

The congressional delegation, chaired by Democrat Representative Adam Smith, will discuss with Syrian officials US-Syrian relations and security cooperation.

This is the first US delegation to visit the Syrian capital after US president Barack Obama was sworn in on January 20.

Syrian observers expect the visit, and other visits expected to take place in February, aim at breaking the ice between Damascus and Washington.

Smith, who has served for 12 years in the House of Representatives, is joined by other six other Democrat representatives: Gabrielle Giffords (D-Arizona), Ted Poe (R-Texas), Glenn Nye (D-Virginia), Representative Frank Kratovil (Maryland), Susan Davis (California), and C.A. Ruppertsberger (Maryland).

Syria's relations with the US struggled under former president George W. Bush, who frequently accused Damascus of allowing people and weapons across their border into Iraq to fight American troops.

However, since the US change of power, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has shown cautious optimism regarding the US-Syrian relations.

<http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/middleeast/news/>

[article_1456787.php/A_senior_US_Congress_delegation_arrives_in_Syria_](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/middleeast/news/article_1456787.php/A_senior_US_Congress_delegation_arrives_in_Syria_)
