

U.S.: No normal Syria ties until it stops backing Hamas, Hezbollah

Contributed by AP
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The United States reiterated on Friday that despite a meeting held by a State Department official with the Syrian envoy to Washington, there will be no normalization of ties with the Damascus regime until it meets key American demands, including an end to "interference in Lebanese issue issue," a State Department spokesman Robert Wood said on Friday.

U.S. and Syrian diplomats met Thursday in an effort to improve strained ties, though Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said it was too soon to say whether relations would improve.

Syria's ambassador to the United States, Imad Moustapha, met for nearly two hours Thursday with Jeffrey Feltman, the State Department's top diplomat for the Middle East. The first such high-level session since September came at the request of the Obama administration, which sought to discuss how to mend the relationship and possibly work together.

Though hesitant to enunciate how the administration's policies towards Syria will differ from that of the Bush administration, Wood stressed that there are certain principles which Washington will not abandon.

"We felt it was important to communicate our concerns directly and we shall see how the Syrians will respond to it, including the interference on Lebanese internal affairs and their support for terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah," said Wood.

It seems that the U.S. was caught off guard upon hearing the news that Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem will take part in the donor conference for the Gaza Strip that is scheduled to take place in Egypt.

Administration officials, however, issued no protests, admitting that Egypt organized the conference and therefore the identity of the participants is at Cairo's discretion. It is unclear whether Clinton will meet with al-Moallem during the conference. Special envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell is not expected to visit Syria anytime soon.

Reacting to Iran's claim that the appointment of Dennis Ross signals the continuity of President Bush's policies, Wood said: "Ross will be working for the U.S. government, not Iran, and it will not be up to Iran to decide who works for it.",

Moustapha told reporters on Thursday that the talks were "very constructive" and he expected there would be more meetings in the coming months.

"We believe that this meeting has explored possibilities between Syria and the United States to engage on a diplomatic and political level and also to discuss all issues of mutual concern," the ambassador said. "We think this is a first step and we believe there will be many further meetings."

Clinton had described the meeting as routine, and said the administration was committed to engagement in the Middle East and promoting Arab-Israeli peace.

"It is too soon to say what the future holds," she said.