

## Hillary: U.S. Sending Two Envoys to Syria for Talks

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JERUSALEM -- Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Tuesday the Obama administration would send two U.S. officials to Syria for preliminary talks on improving relations between Washington and Damascus.

"We're going to dispatch a representative of the State Department, a representative of the White House, to explore with Syria some of these bilateral issues," Clinton said, announcing another step that could help Damascus improve its standing in the West after years of tensions.

"We have no way to predict what the future with our relations concerning Syria might be," she told a news conference with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.

U.S. officials said the two emissaries would be Jeffrey Feltman, acting assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, and Dan Shapiro of the White House's National Security Council.

The Obama administration has been reviewing U.S. policy toward Syria, including whether to return an ambassador to Damascus.

The U.S. ambassador was pulled out of Syria after the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafif al-Hariri.

Syria, which is on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, denies any involvement in Hariri's murder but Washington pointed fingers at Damascus and relations have been particularly sour since then.

Last week, Clinton said it was too early to predict a thaw in ties after a senior U.S. official met Imad Mustafa, Syria's ambassador in Washington.

But Mustafa said the meeting could herald a new chapter in relations and that Syria was open to discuss all issues.

A U.S.-Syrian rapprochement could clear the way for Israel and Syria to restart indirect peace talks they held under Turkish mediation last year.

Clinton said once a new government is formed in Israel, following its February 10 election, the Israeli-Syrian peace track would be on the Obama administration's agenda.

Israel has conditioned a deal with Syria on Damascus cutting its ties with the Palestinian militant group Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement.

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