

Feltman's Trip Complete File: Syria continues to attempt to meddle in Lebanon's Internal Affairs

Contributed by Naharnet, LBC
 Tuesday, 10 March 2009
 Last Updated Tuesday, 10 March 2009

US envoy Jeffrey Feltman pushes back - "This is a Lebanese Issue".

Syria Demands Unity Government after Elections, Feltman Replies: This is a Lebanese Issue

Damascus has reportedly told U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman that it wants a national unity government following Lebanese elections. Feltman replied: This is a Lebanese issue.

Pan-Arab daily Al Hayat on Tuesday quoted high-ranking political sources as saying that Damascus "took the initiative" to discuss Lebanon during weekend talks with Feltman and fellow envoy Daniel Shapiro.

The sources said Syrian officials conveyed to the U.S. delegation their country's keenness on holding Lebanese parliamentary elections on time.

This was okay. But when it came to renewing their call for the establishment of a Lebanese national unity government following the June 7 elections, Feltman allegedly told the Syrian officials: "This is a Lebanese issue."

The sources said the U.S. delegation discussed with Syrian officials the "principles of holding elections without Syrian meddling, not more."

They said Hizbullah and AMAL Movement leaders have recently been emphasizing the formation of a national unity government following Lebanese elections.

On Saturday Feltman and Shapiro held four hours of talks with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem and other officials.

"What we did is give the Syrians the opportunity to raise their vision about the bilateral relationship, their concerns, and we were able to do the same," Feltman said following a series of meetings with Lebanese political and religious leaders on Sunday.

"Talking to people is not a reward. We talk to people in order to solve a problem," he added.

He also sought to ease Lebanese concerns about a U.S.-Syria rapprochement saying: "There is no contradiction between a strong support to Lebanon and an attempt to solve a problem through dialogue with Syria."

On Saturday, Feltman emerged from the talks with Muallem, saying Syria can be a "constructive" Mideast force.

Feltman said he and Shapiro held the "view that Syria can play an important and constructive role in the region," in a conference call with reporters in Washington after with Muallem and other Syrian officials.

"We found a lot of common ground today," Feltman said without elaborating.

Beirut, 10 Mar 09, 08:48

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&F3B2E64F7C5FE09AC22575750025AC9F>

 Feltman: U.S., European Observers To Monitor Elections after Lebanon's Approval

U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman said Sunday that U.S. and European observers will monitor upcoming parliamentary elections, only after receiving a request from Lebanon.

Feltman said following a meeting with Elias Aude, Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church in Beirut, that the U.S. and Europe are willing to observe the electoral process, including the conduct of the poll, "only after receiving approval of the

Lebanese."

Feltman, accompanied by top Middle East officer at the U.S. National Security Council Daniel Shapiro, held a series of meetings on Sunday with Lebanese officials as well as religious leaders, including Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, Grand Mufti Sheik Mohammed Qabbani and Deputy Head of the Supreme Shiite Council Sheikh Abdul Amir Qabalan.

The two U.S. envoys had been shuttling back and forth between Beirut and Damascus.

They were back in Beirut on Sunday following talks in Damascus in the first high-level meeting in four years.

About whether Washington has reconsidered returning its ambassador to Syria, Feltman said: "There is no decision made regarding an ambassador in Damascus."

Qabalan welcomed the U.S. administration's steps to open dialogue with Syria. He said that peace and stability in the Middle East can be achieved through "non-stop talks between the United States and both Iran and Syria."

Qabalan called on the U.S. administration to maintain contacts with Speaker Nabih Berri and to "open communication channels with Hizbullah and Hamas."

He also said that Israel must be pressured into withdrawing from the Shebaa Farms and the Syrian Golan Heights.

For his part, Qabbani stressed the need "for a collective effort in Lebanon to help maintain stability and avoid being driven to civil strife."

"We want a safe and stable Lebanon… for the sake of Lebanon's people and the good of the Arab world," he said.

"We are careful not to allow Lebanon to be dragged into regional conflicts that can only bring harm to all."

Beirut, 08 Mar 09, 18:08

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&F3B2E64F7C5FE09AC22575750025AC9F>

Feltman Meets Qabbani, Qabalan

Two U.S. envoys to the Middle East held talks Sunday with Lebanon's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Qabbani, and the country's highest Shiite authority, Sheikh Abdul Amir Qabalan, in Beirut.

Jeffrey Feltman and fellow envoy Daniel Shapiro arrived in Beirut after a trip to Damascus on Saturday for the first high-level contacts in four years.

Qabalan welcomed the U.S. administration's steps to open dialogue with Syria. He said that peace and stability in the Middle East can be achieved through "non-stop talks between the United States and both Iran and Syria."

Qabalan called on the U.S. administration to maintain contacts with Speaker Nabih Berri and to "open communication channels with Hizbullah and Hamas."

He also said that Israel must be pressured into withdrawing from the Shebaa Farms and the Syrian Golan Heights.

For his part, Qabbani stressed the need "for a collective effort in Lebanon to help maintain stability and avoid being driven to civil strife."

"We want a safe and stable Lebanon… for the sake of Lebanon's people and the good of the Arab world," he said.

"We are careful not to allow Lebanon to be dragged into regional conflicts that can only bring harm to all."

Beirut, 08 Mar 09, 15:02

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&F3B2E64F7C5FE09AC22575750025AC9F>

Lebanon - lbc report - Bassam Abou Zeid - Montage : Roula Rouhana - 08/03/2009
{youtube}o3o8E64BbQc{/youtube}

Feltman: Syria can Play 'Constructive' Role in the Middle East

The United States said Syria can play "an important and constructive role" in the Middle East after senior U.S. and Syrian officials met in Damascus Saturday about how to defuse past tensions.

Jeffrey Feltman said that he and fellow envoy Daniel Shapiro held the "view that Syria can play an important and constructive role in the region," after their talks with Foreign Minister Walid Muallem and other Syrian officials.

Speaking to reporters in Washington in a conference call from Damascus, Feltman declined to provide details of the talks beyond saying that they were "constructive" and covered bilateral, and regional and international issues.

"We found a lot of common ground today," the acting secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs said without elaborating.

But he struck a conciliatory tone.

"The Syrians have concerns with us as well. I'm sure the Syrians will be looking at choices we will be making in the future just as we will be looking at choices Syria is making," he said.

Feltman said the talks in Damascus "built on" the February 26 meeting he had in Washington with Syrian ambassador to the United States Imad Mustafa.

He added they were "consistent with the message" from President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who "have stated the desire to use engagement with all countries in the region in order to address issues of mutual concern."

The high-level visit to Damascus was a "concrete example of that commitment," he added.

Feltman called for patience when asked if the Obama administration wanted to revive Turkish-brokered indirect talks that began between Syria and Israel last year -- to which the administration of former President George W. Bush was lukewarm.

"The United States wants a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace," Feltman said, stressing peace and not process.

"There will be a Syrian-Israel track at some point."

But "at this point, though, we need to be a bit patient" as Israel worked on forming a new government after elections last month, he said.

George Mitchell, the main Middle East envoy, was focusing for now on the Palestinian-Israeli track of the negotiations, but "his mandate does include comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace," Feltman said.

"So we do want to see forward momentum on the Syrian-Israeli track at the time when the parties are ready ... for this."

Besides the envoys and Muallem, the talks involved the U.S. charge d'affaires in Damascus Maura Connelly, Syria's deputy foreign minister Faisal Mekdad and Bussaina Shaaban, President Bashar al-Assad's adviser on political and media affairs.

The group met for three and a half hours before Feltman had a private meeting with Muallem.

Feltman added that he and Shapiro would return to Beirut on Sunday for more talks with Lebanese authorities before heading back to the United States via Europe.(AFP)

Beirut, 07 Mar 09, 16:05

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&F3B2E64F7C5FE09AC22575750025AC9F>

Lebanon - lbc report - Bassam Abou Zeid - Montage : Nancy Choueiry - 06/03/2009
{youtube}7Kui9Y7wkRU{/youtube}

Feltman, Shapiro Arrive in Beirut Ahead of Damascus Trip

U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman, and top Middle East officer at the U.S. National Security Council Daniel Shapiro arrived in Beirut from Amman Thursday evening.

They were met at the airport by U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Michele Sisson, who had arrived from London only ten minutes earlier. Shortly after arrival, the two top officials held talks with MP Saad Hariri.

The two top U.S. officials will reassure Lebanese leaders that any rapprochement between Washington and Damascus will not take place at Lebanon's expense.

Feltman and Shapiro are expected to head to Damascus following meetings with President Michel Suleiman, Prime Minister Fouad Saniora and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, as well as with leading figures from March 14 Forces and religious figures.

Feltman and Shapiro are also scheduled to meet with Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, Deputy Head of the Higher Islamic Shiite Council Sheikh Abdel Amir Qabalan, Phalange leader Amin Gemayel, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblat.

In Damascus, they are scheduled to meet with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, and discuss disputed points between the United States and Syria, while affirming U.S. policy on Lebanon.

They are expected back in Beirut after the Damascus visit, which will be the highest level contact since January 2005.

Feltman and Shapiro would also discuss means of bilateral cooperation with Syria regarding Iraq and Gaza. Their mission is to probe Syrian leaders' intentions prior to entering a wider and more comprehensive dialogue on a much higher level.

Beirut, 05 Mar 09, 20:30

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/Lebanon/9701085FD12E542AC225757000650164?OpenDocument>

Feltman, Shapiro to Visit Syria Wednesday

The United States will send two envoys to Syria for "preliminary conversations," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Tuesday on a tour to push "aggressive diplomacy" towards Middle East peace.

"We are going to be sending two officials to Syria," Clinton said. "It is a worthwhile effort to begin these preliminary conversations.

"There are a number of issues we have between Syria and the United States as well as the larger regional concerns that Syria obviously poses."

The officials are Jeffrey Feltman, acting assistant secretary of state, and Daniel Shapiro, a senior official from the White House. The pair are currently traveling with Clinton and will leave for Damascus when the secretary leaves Israel on Wednesday.

Feltman and Shapiro will "explore with Syria some of these bilateral issues," Clinton said.

"We have no way to predict what the future of our relations concerning Syria might be," she said. "We don't engage in discussions for the sake of having conversations.

"There has to be a purpose to them, there has to be a perceived benefit for the U.S."

Feltman met the Syrian ambassador in Washington Imad Moustapha in late February in what a State Department spokesman later described as a "very frank discussion."

In Damascus, the U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Katherine Vandevate said the visit aims to build on his "substantive and constructive" meeting last month with Moustapha.

Clinton spoke while on her maiden voyage to the Middle East as secretary of state during which she vowed to aggressively pursue a comprehensive peace plan for the region.

"The U.S. is prepared to engage in aggressive diplomacy with all sides in pursuit of a comprehensive settlement that brings peace and security to Israel and its Arab neighbors," Clinton told a press conference in Egypt on Monday.

She was there for an international donors' conference on Gaza reconstruction during which she exchanged a few words with her Syrian counterpart Walid Muallem on the sidelines.

Clinton stopped in front of Muallem as he stood at the entrance to a banquet room where conference delegates were having lunch, shook his hand and exchanged a few words with him, reporters said.

"With respect to talking with the Syrian foreign minister, again I will reiterate that in consultation with our friends and allies, our partners, we are reaching out to determine what, if any, areas of cooperation and engagement are possible," she later told a news conference.

Muallem said that the meeting "was short but very pleasant" and that he was "happy it happened."

U.S.-Syrian ties were especially tense under President George W. Bush's administration, which accused Damascus of supporting terrorism and of turning a blind eye to the flow of arms and supplies to insurgents in neighboring Iraq.

But U.S. President Barack Obama has promised to pursue "principled and sustained" engagement with all Middle Eastern states, including Syria.

And earlier this month several leading U.S. Congressmen including Senator John Kerry visited Damascus for talks with President Bashar Assad.(AFP-AP)

Beirut, 03 Mar 09, 15:38

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&B6312ED9CC10EABCC225756E004A4A33>

U.S. Takes Wait-and-See Approach on Syrian Interference in Lebanese Affairs

The U.S. State Department said it was taking a wait-and-see approach on Syria's alleged support for "terrorist organizations" and interference in Lebanon's domestic affairs.

"We'll wait and see how the Syrians respond to our concerns about a number of things, such as, you know, support for terrorist organizations," Acting Department Spokesman, Robert Wood, said in a press briefing on Friday.

Syria "isn't doing enough to serve as a good neighbor to Iraq" and is interfering "in Lebanese internal affairs," he said.

His comment came in response to a question about a meeting between Jeffrey Feltman, the acting assistant secretary of state for the Middle East, and Syria's ambassador to Washington Imad Mustafa.

"Ambassador Feltman pointed out a number of concerns that the United States has about Syrian behavior and activities. We felt it was important that we communicate, you know, our concerns directly to the Syrians at this level," Wood told reporters.

The nearly two-hour meeting on Thursday was the first such high-level session since September and came at the request of the Obama administration.

Mustafa told reporters 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."(AFP photo shows top U.S. diplomat for the Middle East Jeffrey Feltman)

Beirut, 28 Feb 09, 11:12

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/story/3F6E9FEDED66E846C225756B0031E344?OpenDocument>

Washington Doubts Syria's Intentions Towards Lebanon

U.S. State Department official Jeffrey Feltman said the setting up of diplomatic ties between Syria and Lebanon is an "important step psychologically … though the United States still doubts it."

Feltman, a former ambassador to Lebanon, made the remark in a television interview.

"Why does Syria maintain its backing for Palestinian military bases in Qoussaya and Naameh?" Feltman asked.

He was referring to bases manned by Syrian-backed factions in the eastern Bekaa Valley and Beirut's southern suburb of Naameh.

He said Iran backs "an armed group in Lebanon. The evidence to this is what happened on May 7. They were prepared for this act."

That was a reference to the attack by Hizbullah gunmen of Beirut's western sector.

Iran, Feltman said, should support the state of Lebanon instead of working for the setting up of a "mini state within the state."

Beirut, 10 Dec 08, 11:16

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/Lebanon/949EC9FED34D75D8C225751B00324AC0?OpenDocument>