

# 10 Questions for Syria's U.N. Envoy

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Earlier this week, Syria's U.N. ambassador, Dr. Bashar Ja'afari, sat down with NewsMax for an exclusive interview.

The wide-ranging session covered topics from the situation in Iraq, to Syria's relations with Israel, its ties to Hezbollah and of course the future of Damascus' dealings with the United States.

Ja'afari is a 25-year veteran of the Syrian Foreign Ministry.

He arrived at U.N. headquarters in New York City in July 2006 from a similar post at the U.N.'s European headquarters in Geneva.

Ja'afari has also held diplomatic postings in France and Indonesia.

He speaks Arabic, French, English and Persian, and was educated in Syria, France and Indonesia.

During the hourlong interview, Ja'afari flatly denied reports that the Russian navy was on the verge of re-occupying an old Soviet facility on the Mediterranean coast.

He also denied reports that Hezbollah has re-armed since its cease-fire with Israel last year.

The ambassador did state that his government's relations with Capitol Hill are improving, but noted that the atmosphere with the Bush White House may be getting worse:

The following are excerpts of the interview:

NewsMax: Tell me about the Iraqi "refugee crisis" now in Syria?

Ja'afari: Well, roughly speaking, we have approximately 1.6 million Iraqis living in Syria. Actually, we don't call them refugees, we call them victims. ... They are victims who were running away from Iraq fearing for their lives. They are our cousins, so we opened up our borders for them. ... But, practically speaking, they are refugees. ... These refugees live mainly in Damascus and cities surrounding the capital ... as well as on the coast. ... There are all kind of Iraqis, Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, Shiites.

What is their condition?

They do not live in camps. They live in homes, apartments, anywhere they can find a roof. ... They have started looking for jobs, they have called on the U.N. high commissioner for refugees, then they have started to call on the families back in Iraq or in Europe to send them money to subsidize them. Their situation is actually very, very difficult, for the majority of the Iraqis, as well as for the Syrian government. So far, since the (U.S.) occupation of Iraq, we have assessed the cost of housing these refugees to be around \$1.5 billion.

This a huge burden for us in terms of the economy, education, the health system as well as properties (land) value. ... There has been a high increase in the price of apartments, of land, due to the huge demand by the Iraqis. ... Unfortunately, we do not get any help from the international community. ... We have gotten a lot of promises, but nothing has materialized so far. The European Union has pledged 3.4 million euros, which is ridiculous, it is a tiny amount of money. But, they still haven't paid it.

At the beginning, we treated them (the Iraqis) as visitors, thinking that after awhile they would go back. But, unfortunately the Iraqi crisis has endured for years and they still cannot go back. So, I guess we can call them temporary refugees.

We cannot afford this continued strain.

To be honest, we are somehow sharing the burden of the fiasco of others in Iraq who are unable, are incapable, to solve the Iraqi crisis appropriately. Every morning, we are still receiving 3,000 Iraqi coming into Syria.

Have you discussed any compensation with the Iraqi government in Baghdad?

We have discussed a solution with Iraqi representatives to help us through its own embassy in Damascus, to provide some money for the Iraqi refugees, as well to the Syrian government directly ... but, so far it seems the Iraqi government has not taken a final decision. I think the U.S. (Bush) administration may have pressured the Iraqis not to open up to Syria in terms of any financial assistance, so they could pry some political concessions.

Earlier this year a U.S. congressional delegation (led by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi) visited Damascus. Has there been any improvement in Syria's relations with Washington?

Not really.

Maybe the opposite is happening.

Not only has there not been any progress, but the language used by the White House against Syria has been escalating, rather than evolving in a positive sense.

But it seemed the Congressional delegation spoke of progress during their Syrian visit?

Mrs. Pelosi went to Syria, it was a successful a visit. We are glad we had this visit. ... Within Congress, of course, there are a lot of wise voices opening up towards Syria. So, with Congress, the relationship is rather good, but with the Bush administration, I would say it is somehow escalating (getting worse).

Why are things getting worse with the White House?

The Bush administration would like to see Syria give up its independent stance on Iraq, on Lebanon, on Palestine. Which means putting an end to the regional role of Syria and give up its political independence, its pan-Arabic approach. The American administration needs a scapegoat to justify its failures both in Iraq and elsewhere.

Has Syria allowed weapons from Iran to transit into Lebanon or the West Bank?

The Iranians do not need Syria to transit weapons into Lebanon. ... This is not true. Hezbollah's leader has not said that he has been re-armed with any new weapons. He has said that Hezbollah still has enough weapons to threaten Israel, if Israel attacks Lebanon again. The guy is talking in a defensive way. He is not threatening to attack anybody.

The ball is in the Israeli camp.

We need a political settlement. Nobody should see a need to launch missiles into cities. The solution is a political settlement based on the principle of a genuine, a just and a comprehensive approach.

What about reports of Moscow seeking seaport access in Syria for the Russian navy?

As usual, the basis of such rumors are Israelis. ... The Israelis circulate such reports from time to time to cause problems for Russia or for Syria. At the time of the Soviet Union, we had close naval links with the Soviet fleet. We still have a strong friendship with Russia and we still receive navies from many countries. ... The Russians so far, have not talked to us about this possibility. The issue has not yet been studied (by the Syrian government). There has not been a proposal (by the Kremlin).

But, the Israelis have been trying to anticipate things (events), so they put the Russians in a corner and the Syrians also.

Has there been a heightening of tensions on the Golan Heights border with Israel?

The Israelis have been engaged in their biggest military maneuvers on the Golan since 1967. ... Syria considered this a provocative act by the Israeli side. We complained about it through diplomatic channels as well as through the U.N. commander in the Golan.

The U.N. commander certified that the Israelis were organizing huge military maneuvers, but at the same time, he assured the Israelis and the international community through official reports that Syrian had not engaged in any military activities on their side of the front (border).

He also reported that he had not noticed any Syrian military preparations on their side of the border and that he thinks that Syria does not have any intention of launching any attacks against Israel.

Will Syria sit down and talk to Israel?

We are not talking about Syrian-Israeli bilateral meetings.

We are talking about resuming talks within the framework of the international conference of Madrid. ... That means that we need to get back on track within this international framework, including the Americans, of course as a co-sponsor. The Arab-Israeli conflict should have a comprehensive settlement. ... We are talking about a genuine peace, a real peace. A peace that gives everybody a share. This is what we are talking about.

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