# US CONGRESSIONAL VISITS TO SYRIA

Assessment Report by the Lebanese Information Center
02-27-2009

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**The recent visits of US Congressional Comissions to Damascus have stimulated a global interest since those missions explore the possibility of an overture towards the Assad Regime after the significant deterioration in the US-Syrian relations that followed the assassination of late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005.**

**This report presents a short assessment of the four US Congressional Visits to Syria that took place between the end of January 2009 and February 21st 2009. Between the mutual positive and welcoming reactions and the reciprocal reservations, this report will also attempt to disentangle the positions, perceptions and expectations of the parties involved as evidenced by their comments and actions.**

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# Who took the trip?

## January 31, 2009

### Delegation Headed by Rep. Adam Smith Meets with Assad After Meetings in Lebanon.

The first visit to Damascus was headed by Democratic Rep. Adam Smith of Washington State who met with Syrian President Bashar el Assad in Damascus on January 31st, 2009. The visit witnessed lengthy talks between both parties. Before heading to the Syrian Capital, the delegation visited Beirut and met with Lebanese President Michel Sleiman then with Defense Minister Elias Murr and Lebanese Army Chief Commander General Jean Kahwaji and discussed the situation in Lebanon and the region.



**Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA)**



**Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA)**



**Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ)**



**Rep. Frank Kratovil (D-MD)**



**Rep. Glenn Nye (D-VA)**



**Rep. Ted Poe (R-TX)**



**Rep. C.A. Ruppersberger (D-MD)**

## February 18, 2009

### Delegation Headed by Sen. Benjamin Cardin Visit Syria as part of a Congressional Tour that Included Israel and Austria.

Senator Benjamin L. Cardin led a Congressional delegation to Israel, Syria, and Austria from February 13-21, 2009. During its stop in Damascus, the delegation met with Syrian President Bashar el-Assad and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem. Additionally, they visited the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) facility in Damascus to assess the situation of Iraqi refugees in Syria. The focus of the trip was on U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations, the state of the peace process and regional issues.



**Sen. Benjamin Cardin (D-WA)**



**Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI)**



**Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS)**



**Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM)**



**Rep. Mike McIntyre (D-NC)**



**Rep. Gwen Moore (D-WI)**

## February 21, 2009

### Rep. Howard Berman Meets with Assad

Rep. Howard Berman met with Syrian President Bashar el Assad in the presence of Syria's Foreign Affairs Minister, Walid Muallem, Presidential Political and Media Advisor Dr. Buthaina Shabaan and Syria's Ambassador to the United States Dr. Imad Moustafa. Rep. Berman did not have other stops in Turkey and Lebanon as it was reported in some media outlets.



**Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA)**

## February 21, 2009

### Sen. John Kerry Meets with Assad After Meetings in Lebanon.

Senator John Kerry had a 2-day visit to Damascus after passing by Beirut. His Middle Eastern tour also included stops in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Ramallah and the Gaza strip. In Damascus, Kerry met with Syrian President Bashar el Assad in the presence of Syria's Foreign Affairs Minister, Walid Muallem, Presidential Political and Media Advisor Dr. Buthaina Shabaan and Syria's Ambassador to the US, Dr. Imad Moustafa. Senator Kerry also met with Vice President Farouk al-Shareh.

While in Lebanon, Kerry had meetings with Lebanese President Michel Sleiman, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and Future Movement Leader MP Saad Hariri.



**Sen. John Kerry (D-MA)**

# Congressional Delegations: Statements & Positions

***Positive Engagement and No Compromise***

The Congressional meetings with Bashar el Assad evoked the possibility of amelioration in US-Syrian relations. Although the members of the delegations all positively commented on their talks with the Syrian leadership, they insisted on the refusal of any compromises that would affect the US' firm positions towards the Middle East, and emphasized the need for the Syrian Regime to alter its behavior.

Senator Kerry saw possibilities for real cooperation between the two nations: "I was encouraged by the discussions we had with President Assad, Vice-President Farouk al-Shareh and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem," Kerry said. "The discussions were very long, frank, candid and open. We talked about almost every issue that you can imagine between us. While we will disagree on some issues, what I've heard and what I'll take back with me, and hopefully what we'll put in place to take advantage of it, is the possibility of real cooperation on a number of different issues beginning immediately," he added. Furthermore, John Kerry expressed his hope in the emergence of a sustained cooperation between Syria and the US: "My hope is that in the next days things will begin to emerge. I will go back to Washington more hopeful and absolutely more convinced of the possibility of changing the equation. I think if there is a will, we can end years of prejudice disappointment and begin to make real progress"

Rep. Berman echoed Kerry's positive attitude and hope as he asserted: "I had a lively 75-minute conversation with President Assad on a range of issues affecting bilateral relations," adding that he hoped the policy of isolation would not go further and that he would return home 'hopeful' about next steps with Syria.



"We want Syria to respect the political independence of Lebanon,"
*- Sen. John Kerry after his Beirut Meetings*

***Firm Positions in regards to Syria's role in the Middle East***

On another hand, the delegations did not show flexibility with regards to Syria's role with its "neighbors". Effectively, Senator Benjamin Cardin urged Syria to end its alliance with Iran and make 'significant decisions' to smooth ties with Washington. Moreover, Senator Kerry claimed that what he heard in Damascus was "a great willingness to share in efforts with respect to Iraq where there are mutual concerns, and a strong language with hopes for Lebanon and the possibility for providing stability there."

Kerry had shown on earlier stops in his Mideast trip that he is receptive to Lebanese and Israeli concerns about Syria. He made it clear that a US-Syrian rapprochement will require Assad to stop meddling in Lebanese politics and to back away from supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

On the Palestinian end, Senator Kerry announced that Syria has expressed its interest in helping create a Palestinian Authority unity government. "If you achieve that, then you have made a major step forward not only in dealing

## Political Profile



Congressman Adam Smith
of Congressional District number 9
of Washington

**Party:** Democrat
**First Elected To Office:** 11- 5 - 1996
**Year of Next Election:** 11-2 - 2010

**Committee Membership:**

- House Committee on Armed Services
  - Subcommittee on Air and Land Forces
  - Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities - Chair
- House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
  - Subcommittee on Terrorism, Human Intelligence, Analysis and Counterintelligence
  - Subcommittee on Technical and Tactical Intelligence

with the problems of Gaza, but you have made a major step forward in terms of how you reignite discussions for the two-state solution," Kerry stated after his meeting with Assad. Furthermore, the Massachusetts Senator asserted that he spoke candidly with Assad about U.S. concerns: Syria's backing of Hamas, some foreign fighters using Syria as a base for terrorism, Syria's clandestine nuclear activities and other issues. But he came away hopeful of a new direction for U.S.-Syrian relations.

## Syrian Comments on Congressional Visits

***Reserved Stands***

The Syrian officials matched the positive outlook of the US delegations with an expressed will to restore full diplomatic ties with Washington; however, Damascus had some reservations and did not miss the opportunity to express criticism towards the US recent foreign policy.

While meeting with Rep. Adam Smith's delegation, President Assad took the opportunity to clearly reiterate Syria's vision of the situation in the Middle East, particularly following the latest Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, Assad was emphatic –in the various meetings with US Congressional Delegations- in describing what he has to offer to the Obama administration. "If you want comprehensive peace in the Middle East you can't achieve it without Syria," he said. "We are a player in the region. If you want to talk about peace, you cannot advance without us."

> **"We are a player in the region. If you want to talk about peace, you cannot advance without us"**
> *-Syrian President Bashar el Assad*

Also, Assad categorically told Senator John Kerry that "a dictates policy should be avoided because it has been proven ineffective", adding with reservation that "We [Syrians] have the impression that this [US] administration will be different and we have seen the signals. But we have to wait for the reality and the results." Assad further stated that "Dialogue is the only way to ascertain problems and employ an inclusive perception for solutions relying on the region's history." Syrian Official News Agency SANA echoed Assad's positions, stating that "the talks focused on ties between Syria and the United States and the importance of developing them through a serious and positive dialogue based on mutual respect."

On a similar note, Syria's Ambassador to Washington, Imad Moustapha, described the congressional visits to Damascus as being "of extreme importance and depth." He, however, stressed that he was still waiting to see if the visits change "the manner of dialogue between Syria and America."

***Pro-Syrian Political Analysts***

On a slightly more arrogant tone, pro-Assad Syrian political analyst Sami Moubayed declared that [through the Congressional Visits] "Clearly, the Americans are seeking solutions to the Middle East crisis through Syria. After many years of deliberate neglect under George W. Bush, the Americans realize that if they want solutions to Hezbollah, Hamas, or Iraq, they need Syria's help." Nonetheless, Moubayed warns Americans stating: "That doesn't come without a price, as the Syrians have always said, and that price would include removing sanctions imposed on Syria by Bush, starting a dialogue with

### Political Profile



Senator Benjamin L. Cardin
of Maryland

Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission)

**Party:** Democrat
**First Elected To Office:** 11- 7 - 2006
**Year of Next Election:** 11-6 - 2012

**Committee Membership:**

- Senate Committee on the Budget
- Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
  - Subcommittee on Clean Air and Nuclear Safety
  - Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure
  - Subcommittee on Water and Wildlife – Chair
- Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
  - Subcommittee on African Affairs
  - Subcommittee on International Development and Foreign Assistance, Economic Affairs and International Environmental Protection
  - Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs
  - Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Narcotics Affairs
- Senate Committee on the Judiciary
  - Subcommittee on Administrative Oversight and the Courts
  - Subcommittee on The Constitution
  - Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs
  - Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security – Chair
- Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship

Damascus, hearing out Syrian worries, and giving Syrians the Golan Heights."

On a comparable wavelength to Moubayed's, Joshua Landis of SyriaComment.com writes: "Washington cannot look on Syria as a punching bag or pin cushion, as Bush did. If Obama is going to make any progress on peace in the region, Damascus has to be treated as a partner. This is particularly true as the Palestinian arena seems even more hopeless following Israel's elections."

***Syrian Inflexibility coupled with Harsh Criticism to US Convictions***

Damascus Officials plainly hammered any hopes of a Syrian flexibility or responsiveness to US demands. In effect, President Assad declared that "Syria-Iran's relations date back to 1979 after the victory of the revolution" and that "those relations have been stable for three decades and have proven effective in all issues of the region", in a clear message to anyone who would be banking on a deterioration in the relations between Damascus and Teheran.

Furthermore, Assad added that "Syria did not respond in the past to American conditions , and will not respond today" and that "Preconditions on Syria are not acceptable here; we have clear and announced convictions, and today we will simply say no."

Also, On February 19, the day after Senator Kerry's remarks in Beirut - where he also requested Syrian assistance with "the disarming of Hizballah" - the Syrian government-controlled press attacked Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), who had visited Damascus the week before. The Syrian daily "al-Watan" criticized Cardin for "fail[ing] to distinguish between terrorism and resistance," asking, "Are these groups [Hamas and Hizballah] terrorists? We think not." The newspaper also took Cardin to task for looking to "drive a wedge between Iran and Syria." Anyone who "harbor[ed] similar views," it continued, "should not bother traveling to Damascus."



"Syria did not respond in the past to American conditions, and will not respond today"

*- Syrian President Bashar el Assad after meeting with US Congressional Delegations.*

**"Anyone who harbor similar views [to Senator Cardin's] should not bother traveling to Damascus"**

*-Syrian government-controlled daily "al-Watan"*

## Media Coverage

The US Congressional visits to Syria were positively perceived in general by the different media (both in Syria and the US) with reservations from both sides. Political analysts from both countries interpreted those gestures as a definite change in US attitude toward Syria; nevertheless, the Syrian reservation emanates from the confirmation that there will be "no free gifts" to the US and its friends in the Middle East as long as sanctions on the Syrian Arab Republic prevail and so long as Syrian requests are not met. As for the US media's reservations; they are mainly linked to questioning the truthfulness of the Syrian intentions to solve problems in Lebanon, Palestine or Iraq, especially given Syria's strong "Marriage of Convenience with Iran".

On another hand, Lebanese media had mixed reactions vis-à-vis the US Congressional visits to Damascus despite the reassuring messages and speeches of prominent members of the delegations in which there were repeated promises that the independence and the interests of Lebanon would not be compromised. The [partial] fear of the March 14 Coalition is however rooted in the possibility of a Syrian-American "deal" that would jeopardize the future of the Hariri International Tribunal.

Expectedly, political analysts belonging to Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and their allies in Lebanon, Hamas and their supporters in Palestine, had reactions in line with the Official Syrian perception of the Congressional visits.

It is to be noted that the official websites of the Congressmen who visited Syria did not mention anything in relation to those missions.

## Additional Reactions

The Congressional visits to Syria were at the root of various reactions on different fronts. The following section of the report explores reactions to those visits by representatives of the US Administration, Members of Congress, Lebanese-Americans and the Lebanese at large.

***US Administration: US Friends and Allies, including Lebanon, come First***

The US Administration's stance vis-à-vis the Congressional visits to Syria can be studied via two lenses:

1- There is no direct involvement from the Administration in those visits, and hence any talks about the US Administration being "represented" by the Congressional Delegations can be put under the category of the pro-Syrian wishful thinking;

2- There is no compromise on the interests of the US allies in the Middle East, including Lebanon.

US President Barack Obama has promised to pursue "principled and sustained" engagement with all Middle Eastern states, including Syria. When tackling the recent Congressional visits to Damascus, the US Administration's officials were very reserved and the White House issued a denial regarding contacts between Obama and Assad. Moreover, a State Department official said: "Our policy toward Syria remains under review", when asked about Assad's comments on welcoming back a US ambassador, adding that "the U.S. has no interest to put an ambassador in place before we've come to an understanding on what it is we want to work with the Syrians on."

On another hand, the US administration emphasizes that any dialogue with Syria will not be at the expense of the US friends' interests in the Middle East. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was clear on that in her comments at the international donors' conference on Gaza reconstruction during which she exchanged a few words with her Syrian counterpart Walid Muallem. Secretary Clinton 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." Another confirmation on the priority the US is giving its Middle Eastern friends, including Lebanon, is evidenced in the Administration's position on Lebanon expressed in recent announcements by President Obama and Secretary Clinton on the fourth anniversary of PM Rafik Hariri's assassination. Stating that "the United States will continue to support Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, the legitimate institutions of the Lebanese state, and the Lebanese people as well as the full implementation of United Nations Resolutions particularly 1559 and 1701", is a clear expression of this Administration's stance, when it comes to the principles of US policy toward Lebanon.

***US Congress: No Unanimity on the approach to Syria***

Not everyone in Congress, Democrat or Republican, was convinced of the need to have these trips to Syria at this time. Congress is clearly not unified on the approach to Syria; unlike their unanimous support to Lebanon for example. Notably, Rep. Dan Burton of Indiana, ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, expressed wariness about such trips, saying Syria should renounce its support of terrorism before getting any help from the West. "I think if members of Congress are going to go there, they should express the strong views of the United States regarding terrorism" he said.

***Lebanese-Americans: Diplomacy with tyrannical regimes should be based on clear demands***

The major Lebanese-American Organizations voiced their concerns in light of the US Congressional visits to Syria, as they reminded that "The ending of decades of cajoling and appeasement of the Syrian regime and

**Political Profile**



Senator John F. Kerry
of Massachusetts

**Party:** Democrat
**First Elected To Office:** 11- 6 - 1984
**Year of Next Election:** 11- 4 - 2014

**Committee Membership:**

- Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
  - Subcommittee on Communications and Technology - Chair
- Senate Committee on Finance
  - Subcommittee on Energy, Natural Resources, and Infrastructure
  - Subcommittee on Health Care
  - Subcommittee on International Trade, Customs, and Global Competitiveness
- Senate Committee on Foreign Relations - Chair
- Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship

the firm US stand against Syria ignited Lebanon's successful Cedar Revolution and led to its liberation from 29 years of Syrian military occupation."

Furthermore, they urged the US "not to show any signs of doubts or any weakening of its resolve to support democracy and freedom in the Middle East, more especially in Lebanon", stressing the fact that "all and any diplomatic attempts towards tyrannical regimes should be based on clear demands to stop their support for terrorism and to end their interferences in Lebanon and the rest of the region" and that "any other approach would only serve to give [the tyrannical regimes] more room to maneuver, more time to deceive, and more power to obstruct."

***Lebanese Concerns despite US Reiteration of Support***

There were worries in Lebanon about the Congressional visits being a precursor for a new US-Syrian "deal" that would come at Lebanon's expense. However, Congressman Smith's delegation and Senator Kerry's visits to Lebanon coupled with the Administration's clear statements had gone a long way in alleviating some of these concerns. Most notably, Senator Kerry's choice of meetings in Lebanon and emphasis that the Hariri tribunal was "independent from any issues of discussion between the U.S. and Syria," were very well received in Lebanon.

# Conclusion

No significant concrete results or executive actions emerged from any of the recent Congressional visits to Syria. All eyes remain on the Administration to determine whether any executive decisions in regards to further overtures towards Syria will be made in the future.

Also, there is an apparent mismatch between the US intents from the Congressional visits to Damascus and the Syrian wishful perceptions. While Bashar el Assad claimed that "This number of congressmen coming to Syria shows that this administration wants to see dialogue with Syria", and that "dialogue with Washington has started in a serious manner through personalities who are close to the administration and who were dispatched by the administration"; the White House was distancing itself from advisers to Barack Obama who reportedly met with Syrian and Iranian officials during Obama's transition to power. Moreover, Senator Kerry spokesman Frederick Jones stressed that "On his trip to Syria, Kerry represented himself and not the Obama administration".

The upcoming days and future actions from both sides and on several fronts will shed more light on the reality behind those visits. While Damascus considers that "Changes in Washington, and not Damascus, must occur" for the bilateral relationship to improve; the US declares that a better relationship with Syria cannot be unreciprocated and that there should be some form of moving forward on the Syrian end, before even the [US] Embassy Staffing issue is evoked.

**Statement by the President on the Anniversary of the Assassination of Rafiq Hariri**
**THE WHITE HOUSE**
**February 12, 2009**

Saturday marks the fourth anniversary of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. As we share our grief with the Lebanese people over the loss of Prime Minister Hariri, we also share our conviction that his sacrifice will not be in vain. The United States fully supports the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, whose work will begin in a few weeks, to bring those responsible for this horrific crime and those that followed to justice.

As Lebanon prepares for parliamentary elections, the United States will continue to support Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, the legitimate institutions of the Lebanese state, and the Lebanese people. The United States remains committed to the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559. We also will continue to support the voices of peace and moderation in Lebanon, and hope that Lebanon continues down the path of national reconciliation, peace, and prosperity that its citizens so strongly deserve.

## Political Profile



Congressman Howard Berman
of Congressional District number 28
of California

**Party:** Democrat
**First Elected To Office:** 11- 2 - 1982
**Year of Next Election:** 11- 2 - 2010

**Committee Membership:**

- House Committee on Foreign Affairs - Chair
- House Committee on the Judiciary
  - Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law

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- YaLibnan


***In the Margin of the US Congressional Visits to Syria…***

- The Congressional trips come on the heels of the Obama Administration giving authorization for the U.S. to sell Damascus parts to repair two aging Boeing 747s.

- Hamas denied rumors circulating on some media outlets that it had given U.S. Senator John Kerry a letter for President Barack Obama when the senator visited the Gaza Strip.

- Separately, two congressmen visited Gaza: Representative Brian Baird, Democrat of Washington, and Representative Keith Ellison, Democrat of Minnesota. Their trip was arranged independently of Mr. Kerry's but included similar tours of destroyed areas and meetings with United Nations officials.

**Enough to suppress Lebanese fears?**

Senator Kerry intentionally did not meet with any March 8 [Pro-Syrian] Lebanese Officials including Speaker Nabih Berri, despite the fact that he had met with Berri in person back in 2006 under even more "delicate" circumstances.


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