

‘They Are Trying To Link The Iraq War to Syria’

Dr. Moustapha is the Deputy Ambassador of Syria to the United States. He was interviewed by Jeffrey Steinberg on April 7.

EIR: Dr. Moustapha, could you please begin by giving some of your personal background? How long have you been in the embassy here in Washington; and other background?

Dr. Moustapha: Well, I’m really very new here. I started my job here sometime around March 3, so it’s been just about one month. But then, because of the crisis, I hit the ground running, you should say.

Before that, I’ve never been in any diplomatic mission before. I was at the University of Damascus. I was recently Dean of Information Technology at the University of Damascus, and before that, I was lecturing, and of course, I worked extensively as a consultant with the regional organizations, on science and technology policy, and such things.

However, I have always been interested in coming, and giving public speeches about globalization, cultural identifications, and such things. I’m well known in Damascus for such things. I discuss lots of cultural issues, not purely technical and scientific.

EIR: Your official title here at the Embassy, is Plenipotentiary in Charge of Public Diplomacy, and I wonder what your early impressions are of the situation here in Washington.

Dr. Moustapha: You know, as I said, I just have come, and the crisis erupted, and I’m working really very hard trying to explain things, clarify things. You know, it’s not important to know that you are true, in this country; it’s important to make them perceive your vision of the truth, or version of the truth. It’s really not easy.

I have been trying very hard to contact academics, to establish channels with journalists, and, most of all, I was trying also to understand—and this has involved me in almost every public event and seminar at the American Enterprise Institute—and see how these people there, how they think, how they try to recast an image of the world, according to their doctrine. Of course, I’m learning a lot. I’m very new here, and I think I need to learn a lot. And by going to the American Enterprise Institute, I am definitely learning a lot.

EIR: We refer to this, in American parlance, as the “belly of the beast.” Fortunately, there are, I think, some other institu-



Syrian Deputy Ambassador Imad Moustapha (center) at a meeting of faculty of the University Pierre and Marie Curie, in Damascus.

tions around town that are not quite as crazy on the issues of the Middle East war and peace.

Dr. Moustapha: Well, I would say not every—it's not that wherever I go it's the same. I attend sometimes meetings at the Council on Foreign Relations; sometimes I've had some meetings as the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution. I go to the Middle East Institute. I have not dared to go yet to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, because it really needs a lot of, how would I say, patience and forbearance to go there. But I probably will end up going there. I really need to listen to how these people talk and discuss, how they think, because you really have to understand, in order to be able to make a good, correct reaction, and a correct analysis. And that is my job.

EIR: Last week, towards the end of the week, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld made certain accusations, and one might even say, threats, against Syria, accusing the Syrian government of allowing flows of military supplies, and other support, into Iraq, in the course of the war. I wonder if you could explain what the position of the Syrian government is, on those charges.

Dr. Moustapha: Thank you. This is really a very important question.

At the beginning, when they issued those accusations, it was a mixture of surprise, indignation, and something like, "Well, we already expected this." You know, from early, early stages, they were always trying to link Syria to something. So, let's talk about this in depth, and let's analyze everything.

Our point of view is the following: First, we know, and they know that we know, that these are baseless accusations. From the first early days, we knew that. They are not really substantiated, and we know that we could have easily challenged them. And what we did, is, we did say this on the record and publicly—and we even summoned them, the ambassadors of the United States and Britain, in Damascus, and

told them—"Look, whatever evidence, whatever information, you have, we would be very happy to have you come clarify these issues with us. We would constructively cooperate with you on this."

In other words, we knew that those were baseless accusations.

Now, in the beginning, some people back in Syria felt that this was because in the early days of the war, there was this chaos and unexpected resistance. And those people who were promoting the idea of "liberation" of Iraq, and people dancing in the streets, and throwing flowers

and rice on the American soldiers, while women would be ululating—you know this method. So this unexpected reaction of Iraqi resistance to this invasion, made people back in Washington a bit awkward, and they thought that it would be very suitable to change the scene, and talk about something else; to divert attention; and suddenly they were throwing those accusations.

Now, this is a point of view in Syria. I would not go for it, because I told you that it's simplistic. At the very beginning, from the early days, even before this war was planned for, there was this dream of how we will start the war in Iraq, and then try to link Syria. And then probably Syria is next; and then we can move somewhere else, like Egypt, or Saudi Arabia. A grand plan, as formulated by neo-conservative right-wingers. We already knew this. I always thought that this would be the case. Even let's say something like six months before this war has started, I already sensed, from the writings, and from the public statements, and from the meetings I was attending—the public statements of Bush, the neo-conservative rightwingers—that Syria would be targeted.

Now, if you add to this, the dream agenda of Israel, to link Syria with a possible forthcoming war against Iraq; that would be something like the dream of the Sharon/Likud faction in Israel. Having understood this, and having seen how Israel was actively involved in forging documents, about the Iraqi involvement with Niger, and shopping for uranium—do you know this story?

EIR: Yes, I'm familiar with it, but feel free to elaborate it.

Dr. Moustapha: Yes, what happened is, Colin Powell was saying at the Security Council, that we have evidence that Iraqi officials were shopping for enriched uranium in Niger. And then, when those documents were given to the Atomic Energy Commission in Vienna, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and they were investigated, it was proven that these were forged documents.

What happened is, this caused an embarrassment to the U.S. Administration; but then it was hush-hush. And then I was looking at what happened about this; and then I discovered that a certain Senator, he's from West Virginia,

EIR: Byrd?

Dr. Moustapha: No, no, Rockefeller?

EIR: Jay Rockefeller.

Dr. Moustapha: Yes. He did ask Colin Powell about that, and how come that the forged documents were submitted to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State just answered, "Well, our agencies were not the source of those documents." That was the end of that. But then, some top officials at the CIA were saying, "Well, to be honest, those documents were presented by the Mossad."

EIR: Oh, so they did say, Mossad?

Dr. Moustapha: Yes. And it was just like, "Okay, those were forged documents; we'll forget about it." And suddenly here, I hear, a week ago, we have Rumsfeld and Colin Powell saying, "We have documents proving that Syrians were trafficking night vision goggles."

Now, we knew this was not happening, first. Second, they got that general—Brigadier General Brooks—was saying that the U.S. Army has not encountered a single Iraqi soldier, or Iraqi militiaman, carrying night vision goggles. And I'm not saying using night vision goggles. You know, it's funny. It's funny, but it's tragic. The United States Army is using the Mother of all Bombs; it's using cluster bombs, it's using B-2 bombers, Tomahawk missiles, all those high-tech weaponry, weapons that cause mass destruction. And yet they worry about night-vision goggles, that not a single Iraqi soldier was found carrying.

And you discover that it's about like, "Oh, we're having troubles with Syria trafficking night vision goggles." It's a very different agenda. Go back, three, four years ago. Read the writings of those neo-conservative politicians, and intellectuals, and you will see that they were having those grand schemes about starting a war with Iraq, and involving Syria, and moving forward.

EIR: Are you referring to "A Clean Break"?

Dr. Moustapha: I would say—I'm not referring to anything. Please go back. Just read their writings and you will see how today they are translating their writings into policies, politics, and realities on the ground, in the Middle East.

Look, I would say: I'm very afraid this will not serve the national interests of the United States over the long term. What's good for the United States, in antagonizing the whole region, and making everybody, all the people of that region, hate the United States, and [be] frustrated with the United States?

What does this serve? What interest does this serve?

United States' national interest? Why? People in the region, they do not hate the United States. I mean, they disagree about these policies, but they respect its values and its achievements. Who can deny the great achievements of the United States? And I happen to know—I was a teacher at the University of Damascus, I was in daily contact with students there—they admire lots of things about the United States. They adore the technological achievements—you know, high-tech, computers, Internet, all those things. Lots of my students love Hollywood films. I don't like Hollywood films, but they want Hollywood films. And they don't have a problem with the United States.

Once they discuss policies, then they suddenly become really angry, and mad, about the glowing support of the Sharonian, Likudian policies; about the single-minded approach to problems in our region, the double standard approach. My students know very well that Syria has strategically opted for peace with Israel. Syria has embraced the Prince Abdullah initiative at the Beirut [Arab League] summit, about having complete normalization of relations with Israel; complete, comprehensive peace with Israel—in return for our Golan Heights, and for a state for the Palestinians, a sovereign state for the Palestinians.

That's not too much to ask. That's not an extremist position; that's not a rejectionist attitude. We are telling Israel, "Come, we really want comprehensive peace with you." Israel has refused, has shunned it, and Israel replies that it does not exist.

Today you have a so-called Road-Map Initiative. We're very unhappy about it in Syria; we do not consider it a feasible approach to Middle East peace. Yet, what happens? Sharon says he wants to introduce 100 modifications, on what? On a seven-page document! This is incredible! But is he happy to stop here? No.

At the Congress today, already, a movement is building up momentum to pressurize Bush, not to impose on Israel any, *any* peace initiative. And they are now collecting signatures of U.S. Representatives and Senators.

EIR: Let me ask you something about President Bush. I know that prior to the eruption of the Iraq war, there had been a number of personal phone discussions between President Bush and President Assad, and some of the statements coming out of President Bush's own mouth, seemed to indicate that he was very positive towards the possibility of U.S.-Syrian cooperation, and had made some positive statements in Washington about his personal views toward President Assad—similar, somewhat, to his statements earlier about President Putin in Russia. I wonder if you see any prospects in that, of offsetting the influence of the neo-conservatives, who right now seem to be a very dominant, almost overwhelming factor in the Administration?

Dr. Moustapha: I would agree with you. At some point, we thought that Americans here—relationships were really

going on the right track. But I think there was this trial by some elements in the Administration, to undermine such an improvement in our relations. As you well know, we have helped U.S. intelligence after Sept. 11. U.S. intelligence officials came to Syria, and they were interrogating people from al-Qaeda that were imprisoned in Syria, and actually, Syria has helped provide U.S. intelligence to obtain DNA samples from Osama bin Laden's family that were living in Syria. And we were really optimistic about, "Now, we can tell the United States, 'Look we are both fighting terrorism, and extremism.'"

What happened there is, when the crisis started, we were constructively engaged with the United States, the United Nations. We hoped, that by fulfilling our responsibility as a member of the Security Council, by truly being engaged with the world community, if there is a crisis about Iraq, let's try to see what can we do about it: a joint international effort, in order to do something. And then we were happy. I mean, when we voted for 1441, we were not happy at all about this resolution; we thought it was unfair. But we thought by voting for this resolution, although it was painful for us, we were giving a good example where countries, where states are engaged responsibly under international law.

And we thought that by this, we were helping the United States *avoid* war with Iraq. And what happened after—this is what Blix has said, and what El-Baradei has said—Iraq started really cooperating with their inspectors. Iraqi missiles were actually being destroyed. And the inspection regime, this time, was really very harsh, and very aggressive, and deployed hard.

And look what happened. War erupts. Nobody wants to be patient. So what happened is: Yes; President Bush had these mixed signals to Syria. Sometimes, we were reading very positive signals. And then suddenly, we think that certain elements in the Administration, that were very unhappy about this, and had another agenda in their mind—an agenda where Israel would become very angry if any improvement in our American relations would take place—they took into account other agendas. And they succeeded in damaging Syrian-American relations, but from the American side.

But we in Syria still have the same stand. We will cooperate with you whenever you think there is a problem. We will be open, communicative, and we will discuss this. If you think there's a problem, come and discuss it with us, first. Second: We are still looking for political and diplomatic solutions for the current crisis. We were against the start of this war. We are against the continuation of this war. And we are looking for a way to stop this war, constructively and positively. Third: We were *not involved in giving any support* to the Iraqi government; we are only involved in political and diplomatic support to the Iraqi people, who are really suffering today; really suffering terrible things happening to them.

You just have to go and read reports in the British media, the French media, and the German media. I'm not telling you

to go and watch al-Jazeera or Iraqi channels. Once you accept our position: We in Syria—a sovereign state—we disagree with the United States on war. But we are not trying to endanger anything in our relations with the United States. We are not doing anything. We are not trafficking arms to Iraq. We have categorically and absolutely denied this.

However, we are proud of our position. At least, respect our right to be different. We are against this war. Nobody is happy seeing a historic capital of the Arab world being destroyed and bombed. Nobody is happy, obviously; it's the other way round.

EIR: One final question. One of the things that has been said to me—just to further buttress the issue of Syrian cooperation—is that there has been a certain amount of pressure from both Syria and Iran, to make sure that as this tragic military operation is unfolding in Iraq, that the Sharon government is not given any pretext for launching its own military actions against Lebanon or Syria; and that the Hezbollah political organization in Lebanon has also made it clear that it is not engaging in anything that might be construed as an opportunity or pretext for Sharon to extend the war into a second front, perhaps against Syria or Lebanon; which some people in Israel would certainly like to see happen.

Dr. Moustapha: In a way, this might be a possible scenario. Let me remind you of one fact. While the United States Army is busily engaged in Iraq, doing what it is doing right now; and while the international media is busy watching what is going on in Iraq, Israel has accelerated its operations in the West Bank and Gaza. And what is going on, on a daily basis there, is really tragic. And it is like, "Nobody is paying attention—let's go and do what we are doing."

And I have to accept the idea that Israel would be very happy to claim that it was provoked, and try to do something in the region. Because these days are the golden days for Sharon and his whole line of politics. And they think that they should not let this opportunity pass; they should not miss this golden opportunity. They should be doing something to enhance their hardline positions. And we really have to be very careful, and to play it very wisely.

Once you listen to what I'm saying—how we should be careful and play it wisely—you will understand that those accusations about Syria trafficking night vision goggles, are absurd. Because we do understand that, as to the sort of mentalities that are very influential nowadays here in Washington, and have very strong links with AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Council] and with JINSA [Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs]—we understand very well what is going on, and we are watching very carefully.

EIR: Dr. Moustapha, I want to thank you very much for speaking with us, and I look forward to continuing this discussion.

Dr. Moustapha: Thank you. I'm honored.