

Al-Arabiyah Interviews US Ambassador to Syria on Syrian Events, Bilateral Ties

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["Special Encounter" program, featuring an interview with US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford by Hanna Hushan, in Damascus; date not given -- recorded]

[Hushan] Dear viewers, welcome to this episode of "Special Encounter." My guest in this episode is His Excellency Robert Ford, US ambassador in Damascus. Welcome, Mr Ambassador. We are perhaps holding this dialogue at a very critical time in Syria, especially in view of the protests staged in several Syrian areas. I think these protests are the first of their kind in decades. At first, I would like to hear your assessment of these events.

[Ford] First, allow me to thank you on this happy occasion. I am a constant viewer of Al-Arabiyah Channel. I watch it daily. I congratulate you on the high level of performance. Regarding the situation in Syria, we, of course, are sorry for the events of the past few weeks. President Obama offered his condolences to the Syrian families which lost dear ones. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also offered her condolences to the Syrian people. We hope that the government will change its policy and begin a serious and real dialogue in the coming days.

[Hushan] Can you describe the policy Syria is adopting toward the events that are taking place?

[Ford] We believe that most lives were lost as a result of firing by the Syrian security forces. Some armed men certainly opened fire on the Syrian forces in some incidents, but the overwhelming majority of lives were lost as a result of firing by the Syrian forces.

[Hushan] Are there any official contacts between you and the Syrian Government on current developments? If your answer is yes, then on what level are these contacts made?

[Ford] The Syrian Government or Syrian authorities and the United States are in constant dialogue either here in Damascus or in Washington. Last week, the Syrian ambassador visited the State Department.

[Hushan, interrupting] Mr Ambassador, I am asking you about the nature of dialogue on the events currently taking place.

[Ford] We, of course, raised the issue of violation of human rights and the issue of violence in some areas or cities here in Syria. We expressed deep US concern over firing at peaceful demonstrators. We also expressed our concern over the large-scale arrests, which are continuing until today. We expressed our opinion to the Syrian authorities. That was not the opinion of only the United States, but also the opinion of the world that the Syrian authorities should change the policy they adopt toward the demonstrators and carry out real reforms.

[Hushan] The Syrian ambassador at the United Nations accused you of conspiring. Are you really conspiring to topple the regime in Syria?

[Ford] There is absolutely no US conspiring in this regard. Let me be very frank in this regard and say that the problem is now between protesters and people who seek change and reform in Syria on the one hand, and the Syrian authorities on the other. The United States is not involved in what is happening. We, just like others in the international community in general, are concerned about the violation of human rights and particularly the loss of innocent lives.

[Hushan] Many accusations are made from here and there. Is it true that you have been financing the Barada Channel since 2006? This channel opposes the Syrian regime, as you know.

[Ford] We always encourage diverse views in the political, social, and economic fields in Syria and all other countries. We are against having only one opinion on television and radio or in the press. Therefore, we encourage the expression of various opinions even if these sometimes differ with the US opinion. What is important here is that our efforts in this regard in Syria concentrate on strengthening the civil society, and these efforts continue.

[Hushan] This leads to another question, Mr Ambassador. Does this mean that you offer assistance to human rights groups in Syria, for example, and if yes, what is the size of this assistance?

[Ford] Frankly speaking, most of it is directed toward boosting the rights of women and children, and respect for the supremacy of law and professional unions, for example. This work is done in Syria. Also when I was an ambassador in Algeria, we used to have similar programs. Such programs do exist in Jordan, Lebanon, the Arabian Gulf, Egypt, and in Latin American and South Asian countries. They always indicate the importance of building democracy step by step.

[Hushan] You have not given me a definite answer to whether this is in the field of human rights or not. Mr Ambassador, what about the protest movements in Syria? Do you extend any assistance to them, for example? If so, what is the size of this assistance?

[Ford] No, human rights groups in Syria are all under the ground.

[Hushan] What do you mean by under the ground?

[Ford] This means their offices are either closed or under strong pressure from the authorities. We do not extend substantial assistance to them, but in general we encourage activists in Syria and all other countries to defend human rights in their societies.

[Hushan] If the human rights groups are under the ground, the protest movements are then above the ground. What about them?

[Ford] I meant to say: Where is the leadership? The leadership is not central; it is on a local level. This means there are no central organizations to lead the protest movements in streets.

[Hushan] Are you of the opinion that these demonstrations are spontaneous?

[Ford] I do not mean to say they are spontaneous but to say no central leadership in Damascus, London, Washington, Paris, or Moscow is controlling them. As far as I know, they are in general on a local level. There are Syrian youth supporting the idea of having profound reforms. They turn out to stage peaceful demonstrations, but no single organization is in control of them. That was what I meant.

[Hushan] Contacts have recently been held between Turkey and Washington, that is, between US President Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan. Did they discuss any options about the situation in Syria if the situation there exacerbates?

[Ford] Well, President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan certainly spoke about the situation in Syria, but let me be completely frank and say that the future of Syria is in the hands of the Syrian people. This means the Syrian people, and not the Americans or Turks, are the decision makers. Turkey, of course, has interests in Syria as well as the longest border with it. Therefore, the Turks

have interests in Syria. As for the Americans, Syria has an important strategic location. Accordingly, we, too, are interested in the situation in Syria, especially violations over the past few months, but the Syrian people and not the foreigners are the ones who will determine the future of Syria.

[Hushan] If the Syrian people are the ones to determine the future of Syria, then what about the voices coming from the United States and other European capitals that are holding the Syrian Government responsible for shootings here and there although there is not enough media coverage of these events? Do you not believe that such criticism by these capitals might be misinterpreted here in Syria on the level of the street?

[Ford] There is certainly some sort of distortion sometimes. With all due respect to Facebook and You Tube, the messages sent always indicate intention in a certain direction. This is a reason for many of our discussions with the Syrian authorities. We called for allowing journalists to travel in the country and see for themselves what is happening. We proposed the arrival of journalists from prominent newspapers like the New York Times, the Washington Post, or other western newspapers from Britain, France, Germany, and Japan. We proposed the arrival of observers other than the Facebook and You Tube people in order to give their impressions so that we will know facts on the ground from various sources. We will thus not depend on only one source.

[Hushan] Mr Ambassador, do you believe that Syria can overcome this predicament and that relations between Washington and Damascus will be restored?

[Ford] Well, we hope that Syria will overcome this difficult stage, but we also believe that the security solution will not work. Eventually, there has to be a political solution. This is why we have encouraged real dialogue between the authority and people seeking reform in the country right from the beginning.

[Hushan] Mr Ambassador, can relations deteriorate to such a degree that would lead to a military action against Syria?

[Ford] If you mean the US reaction to Syria will be similar to US reaction to what happened in Libya, I will then say every country has its own peculiarity. What is important here is that there is really a negative impact on relations between Syria and the United States. Frankly speaking, bilateral relations have long been tense, but they are now worse than they were even two months ago. Last Friday, President Obama issued a new decree about some persons and entities responsible for human rights violations. He at the same time renewed the sanctions we imposed on Syria a few years ago because of its support for terrorist groups and for pursuing weapons of mass destruction programs. The impact is there, but as I said every country has its own peculiarity.

[Hushan] Mr Ambassador, are there any contacts between Israel and the United States on what is happening in Syria with regard to Israel's security?

[Ford] No, there are not, but frankly speaking the peace process in general is in the interest of the United States, Israel, and Syria. We continue to be very interested in this issue. This administration -- the administration of Barack Obama -- was concerned with the Syrian-Israeli [peace] track perhaps more than any other administration during the past years, perhaps the past 20 years. In view of recent events, our concentration is on the internal situation, especially the violations and unfortunate human losses, which occur almost every Friday and Saturday. Our concentration now is on this issue.

[Hushan] Do you believe there is any hope for peace in the wake of current events in Syria? Do you think this situation will pave the way for a new stage of negotiations?

[Ford] There is always hope. We should not lose hope completely, but currently I think that the Syrian authorities and US officials are all concentrating on the internal situation in Syria. If the situation calms down, God willing, we will look at the peace possibilities.

[Hushan] Some accuse the US Government of being behind the so-called creative anarchy. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was accused of advocating it. Did what happen in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere reflect your desire? Did you plan such things to happen in the region?

[Ford] A few weeks before the start of events in Tunisia, Hillary Clinton delivered a speech in Doha. She said in her speech that the winds of change are blowing on the region and the regimes or governments should change and become more democratic.

[Hushan] Was Hillary Clinton sending messages to the governments of these countries? Did she know what was going to happen?

[Ford] That was a message and at the same time some sort of prediction. It was clear to us...

[Hushan, interrupting] Hillary Clinton is a US secretary of state and not a predictor.

[Ford] Well, the word I said in Arabic was wrong. Forgive me. I meant expectations of frustration on the level of street and expectations of demands for change and reform. These were expected step by step in many Arab societies, the Arab Maghreb, the Middle East, and the Gulf. We as foreign observers felt that. We have had contacts with these societies over a long time. We have heard their complaints and views. When she delivered her speech in Doha at the end of November as far as I remember, she spoke about this substantial increase in pressure for change. If change [words indistinct] has come as a result of a US or western desire, I will say no this has come as a result of pressure by the societies them selves.

[Hushan] Mr Ambassador, do you believe that the situation can lead to further anarchy. I am talking about Syria. Is this why you asked your non-essential staff to leave Damascus?

[Ford] Actually, the decision to send the families of diplomats back to the United States was really difficult for us. It was difficult to separate husbands from their wives and children, but in view of the spread of acts of violence and the increasing possibilities of friction between diplomats and security roadblocks or demonstrators, we decided that it would be better to send families back to the United States.

[Hushan] Mr Ambassador, some accuse the Syrian Government of having asked for support from Iran and Hizballah and some spoke about the presence of Hizballah and Iranian Revolution Guard elements in Syria. How do you view these accusations?

[Ford] Washington has information on the provision of material support to suppress the demonstrators. We view this as a largely negative interference. This is why the new list of sanctions issued in Washington on Friday included the Qods Force among the other groups. We hope that instead of depending on the advice or material support from Iran, the Syrian Government and Syrian authorities would begin real dialogue with the Syrian people and demonstrators and supporters of the idea of reform.

[Hushan] I have one last question, Mr Ambassador. Do you think that the time remaining for you here in Syria -- all know that you came upon a presidential decree and not as a permanent US ambassador in Damascus -- is enough to accomplish the goal for which you came here; namely, bridging the gap between Damascus and Washington?

[Ford] We really hope that bilateral relations will improve gradually and step by step. This improvement, of course, depends on the decisions made by the Syrian officials. Dialogue continues and we welcome this dialogue, but the most important thing is seeing concrete changes on the ground. For my part, I will do my best every day and the results will be good, God willing.

[Hushan] Ambassador Robert Ford, ambassador of the United States in Damascus, thank you very much.

[Description of Source: Dubai Al-Arabiya Television in Arabic -- Saudi-funded pan-Arab satellite news channel, with a special focus on Saudi Arabia]