Syrian Ambassador Moustapha Addresses SSA Meeting at MESA: “Syria-USA Relations: a Thaw or a False Start?”

By Steve Tamari

On November 22, 2008 Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Dr. Imad Moustapha addressed an overflow crowd of Middle East academics attending the annual convention of the Middle East Studies Association in Washington, DC. Ambassador Moustapha’s lecture—sponsored by the Syrian Studies Association—was titled “Syria-USA Relations: a Thaw or a False Start?” In the aftermath of both the election of US President Barak Obama and the US attack on Syrian territory near Abu Kamal on October 26, Ambassador Moustapha focused on the events of the last year of the Bush administration.

Ambassador Moustapha began by describing a series of positive steps taken by the Bush administration officials in the last days of September, just before the US election campaign went into high gear. These steps appeared at the time to be part of an effort to reengage Syria after a period of open hostility toward Damascus that began at the time of the US-led invasion of Iraq in early 2003, but which intensified after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.
in February 2005 when the US withdrew its ambassador to Syria. The US was also vehemently opposed to Syrian-Israeli talks sponsored by Turkey which were not announced publicly until May 2008.

On Sept. 26, 2008 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met briefly with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem on the sidelines of the meetings of the UN General Assembly in New York. On Sept. 29, a round of talks was held between Moallem and the head of the Near East desk at the State Department, David Welch. Ambassador Moustapha attended this meeting and reported that it seemed the US was serious about a re-engagement policy.

But, the promise of these contacts were completely dispelled by a daylight “Rambo style” US helicopter raid into Syria on October 26th which left nine civilians dead. “Until now,” said Ambassador Mustafa, “no US official has explained the reasoning behind this attack.”

During the second half of the talk, Moustapha speculated on the reasons behind the October attack. He suggested there were two possible scenarios: it was part of an effort by some in the US government to undercut Rice’s rapprochement initiative; or it was based on false intelligence—the successful capture of a prominent al-Qaeda suspect would have bolstered the flagging McCain campaign.

Moustapha acknowledged that the Syrian government had to respond, but did so in a primarily symbolic way by ordering the closures of the American Community School US Cultural Center, both in Damascus.

In a question-and-answer period Moustapha expressed his guarded hope for US-Syrian relations under President Obama. “The best we can expect from President Obama is that he will put US national interests first in conducing US policy in the Middle East.” Asked about Syrian support for Hamas, Moustapha quipped, “We are simply following the Bush Doctrine, supporting the cause of democracy. We are not in the business of deciding Palestinian leadership.” On Iraqi refugees in Syria: “We have had no help in hosting 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in Syria. We still host half a million Palestinian refugees and, in 2006, we had to accommodate 625,000 Lebanese for a month during the Israeli bombing of their country.” On Lebanon: “Relations are constantly improving. The Lebanese President’s visit was a high point; we’ve signed 16 of 17 bilateral agreements (excluding security) and these agreements were determined more by Lebanese ministerial concerns than by Syrian concerns. On Turkey: “After a difficult period over the Euphrates’ water, we now have wonderful relations. Excellent personal relations between President Asad and Turkish leaders Erdogan and Gul are very important. Turkey is Syria’s number one trade partner.” On the alleged nuclear site in Syria bombed by Israel in 2007 [the IAEA released a report on November 20, 2009 which said graphite and uranium had been found by inspectors at the site] : “IAEA inspectors did not find the amount to graphite to necessary to build a plant and they found uranium that was probably left by the Israeli weapons themselves.”

Steve Tamari is editor of the Syrian Studies Association newsletter.