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Syrian official says resolving Arab-Israeli conflict key to peace
Calls for peace and understanding in Syrian-U.S. relations
BY PATRICK YEAGLE

The Syrian ambassador to the United States visited Springfield last week, urging better relations between the two countries and an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Speaking at the University of Illinois Springfield, Syrian Ambassador Imad Moustapha discussed Syrian-U.S. relations and answered questions from the audience of about 130 people. Syria is on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, bordering Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Moustapha, a career academic with a doctorate in computer science, was appointed by the Syrian government to serve as an ambassador in 2004. He says he sought advice from a friend and former Syrian diplomat on what the job would entail.

"He said … 'Imad, you need to know the difference between an ambassador and a camel," Moustapha joked. "A camel will work for days, days and days without eating any food. An ambassador will eat for days, days and days without doing any work."

Moustapha said the most important challenge facing Syria and the entire Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a long-standing, often violent disagreement over control of what is considered a homeland by both Jews and Palestinian Arabs.

"This conflict that has lasted for the past 60 years has consumed our energy, our focus, our plans for development," he told the audience. Addressing the issue with reporters afterward, he called it the "core issue" affecting U.S. relationships with the entire Middle East.

"I hope you will not consider me single-track minded, but this is what we genuinely believe is the only issue between the United States and the Arab world," he said.

Syrian relations with the United States deteriorated greatly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Moustapha observes. Syria has been on the U.S. Department of State's list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1979 for its support of armed Palestinian groups opposing Israeli rule in Israel, and Syria's post-9/11 ties with the nation of Iran and opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq created further conflict between Syria and the U.S.

"Suddenly, relations between the U.S. and Syria fell to unprecedented lows," he says. "Relations really became difficult between us and the Bush administration, and I believe in the last five years of the Bush administration, we almost had no exchanges whatsoever with the government of the United States."

However, Moustapha says the election of Pres. Barack Obama marked a resumption of constructive dialogue between the U.S. and Syria.

"Once the Obama Administration was elected, we heard a very different message from what we used to," he says. "The U.S. administration is telling us in the most serious, most sincere way – or at least this is how we are perceiving it – that they are absolutely resolved to find the solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and bring peace to our region."

Some members of the audience questioned Syria's support of the Palestinian movement Hamas, which has in the past been considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. Moustapha noted that Hamas was democratically elected in Palestine in 2006.

"We in Syria are not in the business of telling people who they should or should not elect," he said. "Whether we like it or not, Hamas are representatives of their people….We believe it is far more constructive if we talk to Hamas instead of shunning them."

Moustapha discussed with reporters the experience of Arab-Americans, saying they appreciate the opportunities available in the U.S., but also must deal with stereotypical images of extremism sometimes cast upon them.

"It's a mixed feeling," he says. "In reality, they would qualify it as a very good life here, and they like this country, what it gave them, and the people. On the other hand, they are always sickened by how they are presented in the media."

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