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**“Neither Appeasement nor Improvement? Prospects for U.S. Engagement with Syria”**  
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chair  
House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

There’s been a lot of news about Syria lately, but that is not why this hearing was scheduled. Work on this hearing began well before Scud missiles were once again in the news.

In fact the conceptual roots of this hearing go back to May 2008, when Hezbollah waged a brief but effective street war against the legitimate, constitutionally-framed, democratically-elected government of Lebanon. We should all remember that event, because that was the point when American dreams and illusions about Lebanon should have been laid to rest. In a region where politics is a deadly business and no quarter is given to the weak, the United States, throughout the period from the Cedar Revolution to the Hezbollah insurrection, pursued a policy ripe with bombast and bluster, but backed only by empty words.

Facing vicious, determined foes, playing for the highest possible stakes, the previous Administration offered only token opposition while maintaining a fierce, hard line—at least in words. Even as U.S. forces turned the tide in Iraq by allying with previously adversarial Sunni insurgents to defeat al-Qaeda, our official policy remained fixed to the principle that speaking to our foes was an insufferable dishonor. As Vice-President Cheney put it, “We don’t negotiate with evil; we defeat it.”

A very admirable sentiment. But what happened during this period of toughness and ideological zeal?

When UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which prohibited arms sales or transfers to Hezbollah was violated almost instantly, what was the U.S. response? Empty words.

When the March 14 majority in parliament and liberal journalists began to be assassinated one-by-one, what was the U.S. response? Empty words.

When the March 14 majority was unable to convene Parliament to name a president of their choosing, what was the U.S. response? Empty words.

When Hezbollah took to the streets to challenge the authority of the Government of Lebanon, what was the U.S. response? Empty words.

When Saudi Arabia and France changed policy and began to court Damascus, what was the U.S. response? Empty words.

When Syria refused to cooperate with the IAEA's investigation of the bombed al-Kibar reactor, what was the U.S. response? Empty words.

In terms of U.S. credibility, the Obama Administration inherited, not a partial failure, but a total collapse. Even as the Cedar Revolution was progressively swallowed up by insurrection from within and subversion from without, the previous Administration never changed its rhetoric, or its belief that speaking directly to Damascus was an unwarranted gift. They certainly believed in the efficacy of coercion from the moral high ground, but somehow never actually got around to doing very much of it when it came to Syria.

Sadly, what counts in the world, and no where more so than in the Middle East, is power, hard and soft, and the will and capacity to use it. And during the years from 2005 to 2009, all the bluster notwithstanding, our foes took our measure, and found the United States to be clearly lacking. Nearly all the reverses Damascus and its allies suffered from the Cedar Revolution have now mostly been undone.

And from the policymakers and supporters of the previous Administration, who in decency ought to have slunk off in shamed silence for having watched fecklessly as this disaster—like Iran's steady march toward nuclear weapons-capability—unfolded under their watch, what do they have to say today?

“Appeasement! Appeasement!” they cry, attempting to evoke the days leading to World War II.

This charge is grotesque. Apart from the indecency of comparison with the unique horror and evil of Nazi Germany, the cheap demagoguery of the word utterly fails to capture what the Obama Administration is actually doing. Where, one might ask, is the long list of concessions from America to Syria? Where is the surrender and sell-out of allies? Where is the retreat in the face of challenge? A few airplane parts? A few inconclusive meetings?

The string of defeats and failures that brought us to the current impasse occurred, let us not forget, during the previous Administration. The seeming limits of American power were brutally exposed well before Barack Obama was even elected to his high office.

Appeasement? Shameless nonsense. And more empty words.

It is true that the Obama Administration is pursuing a different policy than the spectacular failure of its predecessor. But that's just good sense. Everywhere but Washington, not repeating mistakes is considered a good, or even a very good thing.

But there is one criticism of the Administration's Syria policy that I do hold with and hope can be corrected today: the explanation of it has been poor, and the defense of it, even worse.

Though I have focused heavily on foreign policy during my time in Congress, my professional background is as a public school teacher and as the publisher of a community newspaper. From both positions I learned a lot, but nothing more important than these two truths: Nothing explains itself and nothing sells itself.

If you want people to understand that our policy with Syria is not predicated on compelling major changes in Syrian behavior in the short-term, that has to be explained. If you want people to understand that our policy of sanctions and political pressure will be sustained until there are changes in Syrian behavior, that has to be explained. If you want people to understand that dispatching an American ambassador to Syria is a tool to send and receive messages and to gather political intelligence for our own use, that has to be explained. If you want people to understand that trying diplomacy with Syria is not a betrayal of either our values or our friends, that has to be explained.

That is why we are here today. To make things clear. To make things plain. To give the Obama Administration a chance to explain a policy which I suspect will be frustrating and slow, but at least—at the very least—one that will be founded on more than empty words.

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