



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
“Confirmation Hearing of Jeffrey Feltman and Robert Blake”  
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Rm 419, May 14, 2009, 9:45 am

Ambassadors **Jeffrey Feltman** and **Robert Blake** appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for their confirmation as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia respectively. **Senator Casey** (D-PA), who presided over the hearing, stressed the importance of these two regions to U.S. national security and the challenges Feltman and Blake will face. He pointed to the Iraqi refugee crisis as both a humanitarian issue and one that threatens the broader security and political stability of the region, and touched on issues from Iran's nuclear program to forging a new peace deal between the Arabs and Israelis.

In his testimony, **Ambassador Feltman** stressed the need to end the war in Iraq responsibly, withdrawing troops in a timely manner while also leaving a stable government behind. He also expressed support for the administration in its diplomatic efforts with all countries in the region, even ones with which the U.S. fundamentally disagrees, and underscored his commitment to strengthening human rights and the rule of law. Meanwhile, **Ambassador Blake** argued that there is no region of the world where the stakes are higher than South and Central Asia, and while **Ambassador Holbrooke** is charged with handling Afghanistan and Pakistan, Blake will work to support efforts in those countries. He also focused on strengthening a strategic partnership with India and encouraging greater ties between India and Pakistan.

During the question and answer session, **Senator Isaacson** (R-GA) questioned Feltman on the possibility of greater Israeli-Arab cooperation on the Iranian nuclear front. Feltman responded by explaining that while the Israeli-Palestine issue was always at the forefront of politics in the region, this is now being overtaken by the threat of a nuclear Iran and this presents an opportunity for greater shared interests that had not existed before. However, he argued that reaching a viable, two-state solution is still in U.S. interests as, among other things, it will eliminate a tool used by Iran to distract the region from its own nuclear program.

During **Senator Kaufman's** line of questioning, Ambassador Feltman addressed the issues of Syrian involvement in stabilizing Iraq and the efforts toward a Palestinian unity government. Feltman argued that while the U.S. has “profound differences” with Syria, common interests do exist, namely a stable and unified Iraq. By sending an ambassador to Iraq and signing a number of security agreements, the Syrian government has made progress on this front but more can be done to foster greater cooperation. As for a unity government in Palestine, he stressed the importance of the Egyptian government in this process, arguing that Egypt should definitely lead negotiations between the Palestinian factions. Feltman highlighted the fundamental need for a Palestinian unity government to abide by the commitments agreed upon by the PLO. He also

argued that while the U.S. does not engage with Hamas it should definitely support the efforts of other Arab governments that do engage in constructive talks.

In responding to questions on Pakistan by Senator Kaufman, Ambassador Blake explained that the Pakistani government is finally coming to realize that dealing with the problems in the Swat Valley are more than just U.S. strategic interests but important to Pakistan's security and stability as well. Additionally, he discussed the importance of promoting freedom of the press throughout the entire region as an important way of promoting good governance and greater attention to human rights.

**Senator Risch** (R-ID) expressed deep concern over the lack of progress in Afghanistan over the last six years and asked Blake to outline a clear, coherent explanation of the administration's strategy toward the country. In his response, the ambassador addressed the importance of a comprehensive strategy that deals with Afghanistan and Pakistan together. He highlighted the troop surge in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan, the epicenters of the drug trade; and emphasized that while driving out the Taliban and eradicating poppy production is crucial, it will also be important to provide new opportunities for farmers and encourage other avenues for the agricultural sector.