



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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**“A Regional Overview of the Middle East”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Subcommittee on The Middle East and South Asia**  
Rayburn Building 2172  
October 28, 2009. 1:00 – 4:00 pm

The House Foreign Affairs Committee received testimony from **Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman**, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. The hearing opened with comments from Chairman **Gary Ackerman** (D-NY) who talked about his concern over Iran, praising **President Regan**'s strategy of engagement, determent, and sustained multi-focal pressure on the Soviet Union and lamenting that the Obama administration has failed to develop a comprehensive approach to Iran. Ranking member **Dan Burton** (R-IN) followed with his concerns that Iran is showing no signs of positive response to U.S. engagement efforts, that the Middle East Peace process has taken a step backwards as a result of the Goldstone report, and that **General McChrystal**'s plan has yet to be accepted. He also expressed his frustration at the lack of religious freedom in the region.

Feltman opened with a brief speech emphasizing **President Obama**'s commitment to a policy of international partnership, reaffirming America's commitment to Israel and declaring that the Israel-Palestine issue, on which progress is being made, is a key concern to promoting U.S. interests in the Muslim world. On Iran nuclear negotiations, he noted that the P5+1 have created a clear two-track strategy of engagement and pressure, while continuing to be concerned about Iranian human rights and its support of terror. The U.S. also stands by Iraqis during this time of violence and the upcoming elections. He also assured the committee that the U.S. position on Lebanon will not be altered by our relations with other states and that the administration advocates a new diplomacy with Syria. Lastly, the administration is on a “new path” to touch the lives of individuals in the region in order to seize peace.

In an intense back-and-forth, Ackerman pressed about the administration's lack of comprehensive strategy towards Iran, to which Feltman explained that while P5+1 is primarily focused on nuclear issues, the U.S. has a comprehensive understanding of Iran's issues. Under Ackerman's continuing questions about supporting the Green Movement, **Feltman recognized the bravery of the indigenous opposition and pointed out that through engagement the U.S. is now able to talk directly to the Iranian government about these issues.** He affirmed that the U.S. supports civil society and seeks other opportunities to focus on Iran's misbehavior. On Lebanon, the U.S. will not trade Lebanese sovereignty for peace with Syria and the administration is committed to implementing U.N. Resolution 1701 and supporting, without participating in, the Hariri tribunal.

Burton used his time to talk about his frustration that while the U.S. negotiates, Iran is still building nuclear weapons and that the U.S. should express that there are limits to U.S. patience. Feltman agreed that this could not be a process of “talking for talking's sake.” Under questioning from **Robert Wexler** (D-FL) about prioritizing settlements in Israel, Feltman explained that this was an issue for the negotiating table and the goal now is to get the parties talking again in the best possible atmosphere. The U.S. also

supports the development plan of **Prime Minister Fayyad** and seeks to provide support as Palestinians direct the initiative.

**Dana Rohrabacher** (R-CA) pressed the issue of whether Obama's promotion of U.S. "sincerity" had altered negative Iranian policies. Feltman reemphasized the need for engagement, and said that **the Cairo speech was a challenge to break stereotypes that could hopefully become another tool in the region.** Ultimately, the U.S. has been clear about its support for democracy and civil society. **Shelley Berkley** (D-NV) followed with a statement favoring a two-state solution, worrying that publicly pressing the settlement issue has allowed **President Abbas** to delay negotiations. She also expressed concern that the Israel-Palestine issue is linked to solving all other reform issues in the region, to which Feltman stated that there is no formal linkage between these issues. According to Feltman, the U.S. needs to work on regional issues simultaneously, Israel is used as a pretext for Iranian interference, and the quartet agreement is both a way for Hamas to come to the negotiating table and a foundation to build a Palestinian state.

Asked about "bright spots" in the region and refugees by **Russ Carnahan** (D-MO), Feltman highlighted Egypt's role in the peace process, Saudi Arabia's financial support of the PA, and robust counter-terrorism efforts in North Africa. The issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is something for the negotiating table. Responding to **Michael McMahon** (D-NY), Feltman explained that Turkey is playing a constructive role for peace and that the U.S. is working multilaterally to deter businesses from working in Iran. Responding to **Jim Costa** (D-CA), Feltman said the U.S. partner for peace needs to be Palestinians that accept Israel's right to exist. The U.S. is working to improve curricula in the Arab world and every party in the region, speaking about other Arab countries, needs to help build an atmosphere for peace.

Feltman did not want to speculate about U.S. action when asked by **Gerald Connolly** (D-VA) if Palestinian reconciliation does not occur, will the administration support an interim peace with the West Bank. Feltman also hoped that the Lebanese people are able to move beyond the roadblocks of Hezbollah and **Michel Aoun** in forming a government, as they did before. **Bob Inglis** (R-SC) questioned why **grant funding was decreased for Freedom House and IRI in Iran**, asking for specific information about these cases. Feltman said the U.S. is not appeasing Iran, the total level of funding has not dropped nor have the broad policy objectives changed. The grant process, however, is considered as proprietary, but Feltman promised a briefing between staffers.

**Brad Sherman** (D-CA) received assurances that the State Department will conduct due diligence to ensure \$2.5 million earmarked for Syria will not go to **President Assad**. Responding to Ackerman's concern about the Goldstone report, Feltman noted that the U.S. will use its voice in the U.N. to make clear the problems this report poses and to steer the U.N. away from anti-Israeli biases, but he was pessimistic about American influence in the General Assembly. Rohrabacher pressed the issue of the administration's rhetorical retreat from defending human rights and asked for an update on the MEK situation in Iraq. **Feltman stressed that the U.S. has not stepped away from human rights, but that perhaps the language of the Cairo speech sounds different.** Even though the U.S. has received assurance from Iraq that the MEK would not be deported to a country that would persecute them, the current issue is whether Iraq is going to forcibly move the MEK to a different location in the country, which could lead to violence. **Ron Klein** (D-FL) concluded with a question about efforts to curb Chinese relations with Iran. Feltman responded that the U.S. is working to persuade Arab partners to use their influence to alter China's priorities. He also explained, under Congressional prompting, that the State Department has set up an inquiry to examine twenty American companies who are possibly doing business in Iran.