

VICTOR ATIYEH  
GOVERNOR  
1979-1987



INTERNATIONAL  
CONSULTANT & TRADE

Edward Djerejian  
Rice University  
6100 Main Street – Mail Stop #40  
Houston, Texas 77005

March 25, 2002

Dear Ambassador Djerejian,

So many times I have thought about writing to you for I have fond and clear memories of the last time we met in Syria. I came away with unusually good feelings that our country had the very best representation possible in Syria through you.

Our meeting and my report to you in the lobby of the Sheraton after my long discussion with President Hafiz Assad was brought into sharp focus in the last couple of days when someone gave me a news story. This story was describing a group of government officials, academics, businessmen and other experts that you would bring together to open a dialogue with Syria on many issues including terrorism. This had the blessing and support of President Bashar al-Assad.

The story went on to say "The goal is to promote an open exchange of views on neutral ground and outside of a strict government context that would allow both sides to think "outside the box" and develop new options for solving problems between them."

I could not help but vividly recall the agreement for an informal intermediary by President Assad which---to my great distress---was rejected by my country and which in many ways is reflected in your program. I believed then—and believe now with your effort—that it is like chicken soup when one is sick, "it may not help but it won't hurt".

I sincerely hope you have great success in what I consider a most worthwhile and noble effort. At the same time I send along my warmest best wishes to you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Victor Atiyeh", written over a horizontal line.

Victor Atiyeh

NEWS STORY FOR RAS. 6384 (Source: RAS)  
18:20 Syria, U.S. to launch unofficial dialogue  
SYMBOLS: I/US I/NEWS I/WASH I/SY I/MEAST I/PS I/IL I/DIP I/EG I/LB I/JO  
I/SA N/GEN

By Carol Giacomo, Diplomatic Correspondent  
WASHINGTON, March 21 (Reuters) - Breaking new ground in a long-troubled relationship, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has agreed to launch a Syrian-American dialogue under the auspices of Rice University's James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy, an organizer said on Thursday.

RICE UNIV.  
6100 MAIN ST. MAIL STOP #40  
HOUSTON, TX 77005

Institute Director Edward Djerejian told Reuters the dialogue would bring together government officials, academics, businessmen and other experts on an unofficial basis to discuss major issues between the two countries, including terrorism.

Although Syria remains on the U.S. list of states accused of sponsoring terrorism, Damascus has cooperated with the United States since the Sept. 11 attacks by sharing intelligence and thus escaped being lumped by President George W. Bush with Iraq, Iran and North Korea as a member of the "axis of evil."

Djerejian, a former ambassador to Syria who held other senior positions during a 30-year U.S. diplomatic career, said Assad consented to the dialogue initiative during a meeting in Damascus in January.

The first conference will be held at the Baker Institute in Houston, Texas, in late May; a second is planned for Damascus in the fall.

Djerejian said Assad had been interested in what he called a "cultural dialogue" with the United States for some time and quickly agreed to the idea during the Damascus meeting.

Issues on the agenda in addition to terrorism include Middle East peace efforts, energy, commercial ties and culture.

The goal is to promote an open exchange of views on neutral ground and outside of a strict government context that would allow both sides to think "outside the box" and develop new options for solving problems between them.

One of the first issues to be tackled by the group will be terrorism, including U.S. complaints that Syria continues to allow Islamic extremist groups to run training camps in the Bekaa Valley and to maintain offices in the capital, Damascus.

Assad "himself suggested that issue (terrorism) as one of the top issues to discuss," Djerejian said.

"It's a complex issue but one that needs to be addressed by both sides -- candidly, analytically -- to determine what can be done," he said.

He declined to suggest what it would take to have Syria crack down on groups within its borders that the United States considers part of a global extremist network.

Djerejian is a leading proponent of the importance of U.S. relations with Syria, a major regional player in the Middle East and a critical actor in any comprehensive peace there.

U.S.-Syrian relations have had their difficult moments in recent years but there have been instances of cooperation as

well, such as when Damascus joined with the United States in opposing Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War.

Assad became president in 2000, after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad.

Djerejian said he believed Assad is committed to economic and social reforms in his country and understands "the challenges of modernity."

Assad is "a very intelligent interlocutor and I think that he does understand the tremendous challenge of moving a country like Syria forward given all the problems," he said.

((Washington bureau, +1 202-898-8300, fax +1 202-898-8383, carol.giacomo@reuters.com))

Thu Mar 21 23:20:18 2002 -GMT- pnc (nN21243146) = 1 23:20