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Subject: In Syria, U.S. ambassador drops diplomatic niceties (Reuters)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. ambassadors are usually the most measured of professionals, weighing each word in a delicate dialogue to advance America's interests with a minimum of public fuss.

But Robert Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria, is taking an undiplomatic tack -- flouting government travel restrictions, courting opposition figures and taking to Facebook to publicly denounce Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown on unarmed protesters.

"An ambassador is a very visible symbol of American interest, and I'm a very visible symbol of the American people, so you can't just hide behind closed doors," Ford told Reuters in a telephone interview. "I do have a job to do and it is important that we be seen doing that job both by the Syrians and by the American people."

One of the State Department's top Arabists, Ford arrived in Damascus in January with a very different brief.

As the first U.S. ambassador to Syria in five years, he was expected to implement a policy of gradual rapprochement in hopes of prising the Assad government away from its alliance with Iran, Hezbollah and other Islamist groups and facilitating cooperation on new peace moves with Israel.

This was part of President Barack Obama's outreach to traditional adversaries, including Iran, but ran into criticism in the U.S. Congress where there is deep suspicion of Damascus and its support for Hezbollah, a sworn foe of Israel.

The Obama administration sent Ford to Damascus last year in a "recess appointment," a temporary move because the U.S. Senate would not confirm Ford's appointment.

The soft-spoken envoy proceeded to radically redesign his mission to become one of the most outspoken critics of Assad now operating in Damascus.

This appears to have helped him in the Senate, where the Foreign Relations Committee voted on Tuesday to confirm him as ambassador. He must still be approved by the full Senate.

"This is not your typical diplomatic engagement," said Andrew Tabler, a Syria expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "It really turns engagement on its head and mixes things up on the ground in Syria."

FACEBOOK AND FURY

Ford made his first public move in July, when he traveled from Damascus to the restive city of Hama to show support for protesters some 14 weeks into the wave of bloody anti-Assad demonstrations sweeping the country.

In Hama -- scene of a 1982 massacre which symbolized the ruthless rule of Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez -- Ford was welcomed with flowers and olive branches, visited injured protesters and talked to local residents.

The trip infuriated the Syrian government, which accused him of inciting unrest. Three days later, after Ford posted a note on Facebook explaining the trip, pro-Assad loyalists attacked the U.S. embassy compound in Damascus.

The Obama administration toughened its position in August, saying Assad should step down and imposing sanctions on the petroleum industry, a major government money-earner.

Ford made a trip to another restive Syrian city last month, ignoring government requirements that he give prior notice of his travel.

A career U.S. diplomat, Ford was U.S. ambassador to Algeria from 2006-2008 and also served in Bahrain, Egypt and Iraq. A fluent Arabic speaker, he has not shied away from using firm language to set out the U.S. position.

On the embassy's Facebook page, he has rejected assertions that Washington is aiding "terrorists," declared that Assad's government is incapable of real reform and replied to comments from Syrians, which he says mischaracterize U.S. positions.

"Mujtaba Xr warns me that I will face being killed if I continue my criticism of the repression in Syria," Ford said on Facebook, referring to one posted comment. "I take his post to be a perfectly good example of the kind of intolerance that has provoked such discontent in Syria."

U.S. officials described Ford's Facebook push as an effort to put a human face on U.S. opposition to the repression.

"In Arab culture the idea of a personal relationship, even if it's only on Facebook, matters a little more," said one senior U.S. official.

ON THE ROPES

While, there have been suggestions that Ford may be withdrawn from Syria, State Department officials reject that and say he remains in contact with senior Syrian officials though they concede privately that communication has suffered.

Last month, the Obama administration imposed sanctions on Syria's foreign minister, Walid al-Moualem.

Diplomatic analysts say Ford's public diplomacy may yet prod Syria to expel him and push Damascus and Washington to a new level of estrangement. That would be the opposite of what Ford hoped to achieve when he arrived in Damascus.

"I interpret from the fact that he's still there that it is not something that they choose to make into a capital offense. But it could happen at any time," said Richard Murphy, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria now at the

Middle East Institute.

The United States, meanwhile, will shift its focus to what comes after Assad -- making Ford even more important as Washington seeks a grass-roots view of the changes under way.

"What the United States can do is influence a political transition toward meaningful reforms with the hope extremists will not hijack the process," said Edward Djerejian, ambassador to Syria from 1989-91. "The American ambassador would be carrying out American foreign policy interests in the country trying to ensure that this happens."

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