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## US congressmen see joint interests with Syria

20 hours ago

DAMASCUS (AFP) — A visiting US congressional team met Syria's President Bashar al-Assad on Sunday and voiced optimism that the two countries could work together to advance their common interests in the region.

"We had a candid and constructive meeting," the delegation made up of Stephen Lynch, a Democrat, and Republican Bob Inglis said in a statement issued by the American embassy after the talks.

They said the talks covered Lebanon, the security situation on the Syrian-Iraqi border, the Middle East peace process and humanitarian relief efforts in Gaza.

"We are optimistic that, although we have substantial differences, we nonetheless have shared interests in the region," they said.

"With genuine effort on all sides, we are hopeful that we can work constructively towards our mutual goals."

Syria's state news agency SANA said Assad and the congressmen discussed ways "to advance Syrian-US relations through a serious and constructive dialogue ... to achieve just and peaceful solutions to the region's problems."

The delegation arrived in the Syrian capital on Saturday, the embassy said.

Damascus-Washington ties, long strained over Syria's alliance with Iran and support for anti-Israel groups such as Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, have improved under US President Barack Obama.

Relations sank to their lowest ebb under former president George W. Bush's administration.

It accused Syria of being a gateway for "foreign terrorists" into Iraq to fight alongside Al-Qaeda, of meddling in Lebanon, and also imposed sanctions on Damascus in 2004.

But several high-profile US envoys have visited Damascus this year as the Obama administration pursues a policy of engaging with all countries in the region, even long-time foes.

Last month, Assad said he was ready to act as a mediator with Iran over its controversial nuclear drive, provided Western countries came up with a clear plan to submit to Tehran.

The Syrian president also praised Obama as a man of his word for having honoured promises over a pullout from Iraq and ordering the shutdown of the detention centre at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

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Bashar al-Assad (C-L) Walid Muallem (2nd L), during a meeting with a US congressional delegation

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