Syrian envoy decries lack of diplomacy

Ambassador takes part in OU panel discussion on Middle East

By James S. Tyree
Staff Writer

NORMAN — Imad Moustapha, Syria’s ambassador to the United States, said Wednesday at the University of Oklahoma that he doesn’t understand why there is no formal diplomatic relationship between the two countries, despite their differences.

“When you have a problem, you intensify talks,” Moustapha said during a panel discussion at Gaylord Hall library. “This is, in a way, childish. I used to do this when I was in kindergarten; boycott the boys I did not like.”

The ambassador spoke at a panel discussion at Gaylord Hall. The OU Center for Peace Studies and the International Programs Center organized the event, which about 150 people attended.

Moustapha talked of Syria’s relations with the United States and Israel with moderators Josh Landis and Zach Messitte, and he answered audience questions.

Hopeful for relations

Moustapha said Syria hoped diplomacy with the United States would resume after three meetings last year with a commission headed by former Secretary of State James Baker III and former U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton of Indiana.

He said optimism grew in April when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., visited Damascus and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Syrian officials in Egypt. But nothing happened.

Moustapha said he learned Vice President Dick Cheney and the National Security Council “were fiercely opposed” to the idea because they still consider Syria to be a rogue state.

Critical of administration

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s like nothing had happened,” Moustapha said.

The ambassador also criticized the Bush administration for reports of a Sept. 6 Israeli air strike on a suspected nuclear facility in Syria.

Moustapha said the “whole story is a total fabrication,” adding the International Atomic Commission said there is no nuclear activity in Syria and Israel never claimed the target was a nuclear installation.

“What amazes me and astonishes me is this only surfaces in Washington, D.C., and is only talked about in Washington, D.C.,” he said.

In answering a moderator’s question, Moustapha said he believes peace between Syria and Israel is “inevitable.”

He said it will happen when the Golan Heights goes back to Syria and Palestinians have their own sovereign nation.

Moustapha said the war in Lebanon last year taught Israel it cannot automatically depend on its military superiority in the region and on U.S. support when dealing with Arab nations.

“There is no alternative to peaceful resolution,” Moustapha said. “I believe in my heart that wisdom will prevail. The constituency for peace in Israel is growing.”

University of Oklahoma President David Boren said events like the panel discussion “couldn’t be more timely” given world events.

“It is so important to communicate with each other, even when we’re communicating points of disagreement,” Boren said.
Standing his ground

Syrian ambassador denies nuclear program in OU visit

By Julianna Parker
Transcript Staff Writer

The Syrian ambassador to the United States denied allegations his country was developing a nuclear arms program when he was questioned about it at the University of Oklahoma campus Wednesday.

"Syria has never tried in the past to develop nuclear technology, we are not presently trying to develop nuclear technology nor do we intend to develop nuclear technology in the future," said Imad Moustapha, the Syrian ambassador.

These assertions were questioned Saturday when the New York Times reported the Israeli military bombed a nuclear power plant in Syria Sept. 6.

"The whole story is a total fabrication," Moustapha said.

He did confirm, however, that the Israeli attack took place.

The accusations Syria is developing nuclear technology came from Washington D.C., Moustapha said. They reminded him of "the stories circulating in the U.S. in the run up to the war in Iraq," he said.

The Syrian ambassador came to OU for a panel discussion open to the public Wednesday afternoon in the Edith Kinney Gaylord Library in Gaylord Hall.

"U.S.-Syrian Relations: Cooperation or Conflict" was moderated by Dr. Joshua Landis, co-director for the Center for Peace Studies, and Dr. Zach P. Meissette, vice provost for International Programs Center.

Landis opened the event by pointing out that Syrians have played a big part in Oklahoma history, even being immortalized in the musical "Oklahoma!" as the traveling salesman.

"Looking out over this audience, I see a mix of good," Landis said.

Members of the Syrian community in Oklahoma attended the panel discussion Wednesday. Arabic greetings were heard as community and university members with Middle Eastern roots mingled in the library. The room was full with more than 100 people sitting in chairs that faced the window ideal wall. Tensions grew during the 1 1/2 hour discussion, as was to be expected when discussing such volatile issues.

OU President David Boren introduced Moustapha, saying that meetings such as this one are extremely important.

"It is important for us to relearn the art of listening," Boren said.

Meissette started the discussion by asking Moustapha about the Sept. 6 Israeli attack.

After Moustapha denied that the Israelis hit a nuclear plant, Meissette pointed out that the Israelis might have risked the attack if the site were as mundane as Syria claimed.

Also, Meissette said the Arab world is strangely silent on the attack.

"What does this mean?" Meissette asked Moustapha.

Moustapha said this was only another attack in a long history of fighting between the two countries.

Landis, who has lived in Syria several times and is considered an expert on Syrian issues, asked Moustapha about U.S.-Syrian relations, and why the ambassador has been "frozen out" of diplomatic talks.

Moustapha laid the blame on the U.S., calling its actions cutting Syria off diplomatically "childish."

"When you have a problem with a country, you increase diplomatic efforts, you don't boycott them," he said.

Landis asked Moustapha if he thought there would ever be peace between Syria and Israel. Syria has a long conflict with Israel, saying Israel took the Golan area which should be Syria's.

Moustapha said peace is "inevitable." He said he saw positive signs last summer when Hezbollah was able to prevent Israel from taking the entire country of Lebanon.

"Israel cannot continue to depend on its sheer military might," he said, which comes from the "flagrant, blind support of the U.S. for Israel regardless of whether its right or wrong."

"One day the Israelis will realize they need to have peace," he said, which would entail Israeli giving up the Golan.

When asked about Syria's position on Iraq, Moustapha said he was part of a delegation that came to Washington, D.C., before the invasion and warned against it.

"We do not need another war in our region; Do not come," Moustapha said he told U.S. officials.

Landis asked Moustapha if democracy was possible in Syria, which has an authoritarian regime.

"Syria will continue to open up and evolve, both politically and economically," Moustapha said. He added one caveat.

"But we will do it at our own pace," he said. He went on to say it is an undeniable fact that the U.S. wants to destabilize Syria, even though they are slowly changing.

Students asked several questions at the end of the panel discussion. One student asked why Palestinian emigrants in Syria were not allowed citizenship despite being in the country for generations.

Moustapha turned his answer toward the Israelis, asking why Israel would not let Palestinians back to their homes.

"You are telling me they don’t have the human right of going back to their country?" Moustapha said.

This comment was the only one of the afternoon to draw applause from some of the audience.

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